PC GAMER®

ANNUAL

2026

PC GAMER

TOP 100

THE BEST GAMES YOU SHOULD PLAY TODAY

RETURN TO BOHEMIA

KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE II

THE DEFINITIVE MODS FOR HENRY'S EPIC ADVENTURE

THE WITCHER 3

TEN YEARS OF THE LEGENDARY RPG

BALDUR'S GATE III

SWEN VINCKE ON LARIAN'S SUCCESS

CIVILIZATION

THE HISTORY OF THE STRATEGY SERIES

CRYSIS

THE STORY OF THIS FPS GAME-CHANGER

EXTRA LIFE

ALPHA PROTOCOL
WEIRD MODS
CALL OF DUTY 2
TW: WARHAMMER III
& MORE!

Digital Edition

FUTURE

VOLUME 9

"WE MARK A DECADE OF MONSTER-SLAYING IN THE WITCHER 3"

ROBERT JONES
Twitter
@rnicholasj
This year
Tirelessly finessed the arcane sigils and wards that form the robust scoring system for the PC Gamer Top 100.

Welcome to the latest edition of the PC Gamer Annual. Inside, we have compiled the best games, features and Extra Life high jinks from the last 12 months. We celebrate the diversity of PC gaming with our annual Top 100, spotlighting the best games you should be playing. On page 40, we mark a decade of monster-slaying in *The Witcher 3* by speaking with CD Project RED. Turn to page 54 for the history of the genre-defining *Civilization* series as it heads into a new era. And on page 76, devs reveal how they pulled off such a remarkable feat in bringing *Crysis* to PC. Of course, there's loads more besides, so turn the page and embrace the greatness PC Gamer has to offer.

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TALK TO PC GAMER
Have your say! Email us at letters@pcgamer.com

The PC Gamer team

RICK LANE
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This year
Donned a dusty Nanosuit and headed into the jungle with a squad of Crytek devs to relive the glory days of *Crysis*.

FRASER BROWN
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This year
Went on a sweet picnic down by the river of the Forgotten Realms with Larian lead Swen Vincke to discuss the studio's future.

JOSHUA WOLENS
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This year
Heralded the tenth birthday of *The Witcher 3* by sharpening his silver sword, and venturing into the CDPR offices.

IAN EVENDEN
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This year
Built empires and brought nations ruin in his retrospective of the *Civilization* series. Let's hope it didn't go to his head...

MATT ELLIOTT
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This year
Remarkably tore himself away from *TW: Warhammer III* after witnessing the glory of its dizzying Immortal Empires update.

JESS KINGHORN
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This year
Entered her villain era and cackled on her throne of skulls about the best baddies in all of PC Gaming.

DANIELLA LUCAS
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@daniellamlucas
This year
Almost drowned in stamps and letters in bringing you the list of the best mail delivery games on PC.

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THE PC GAMER TOP 100

The PC Gamer team presents the hundred best games you should be playing right now.

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THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

Can you believe it's a decade old? CD Project Red celebrate the RPG that took the studio to new heights.

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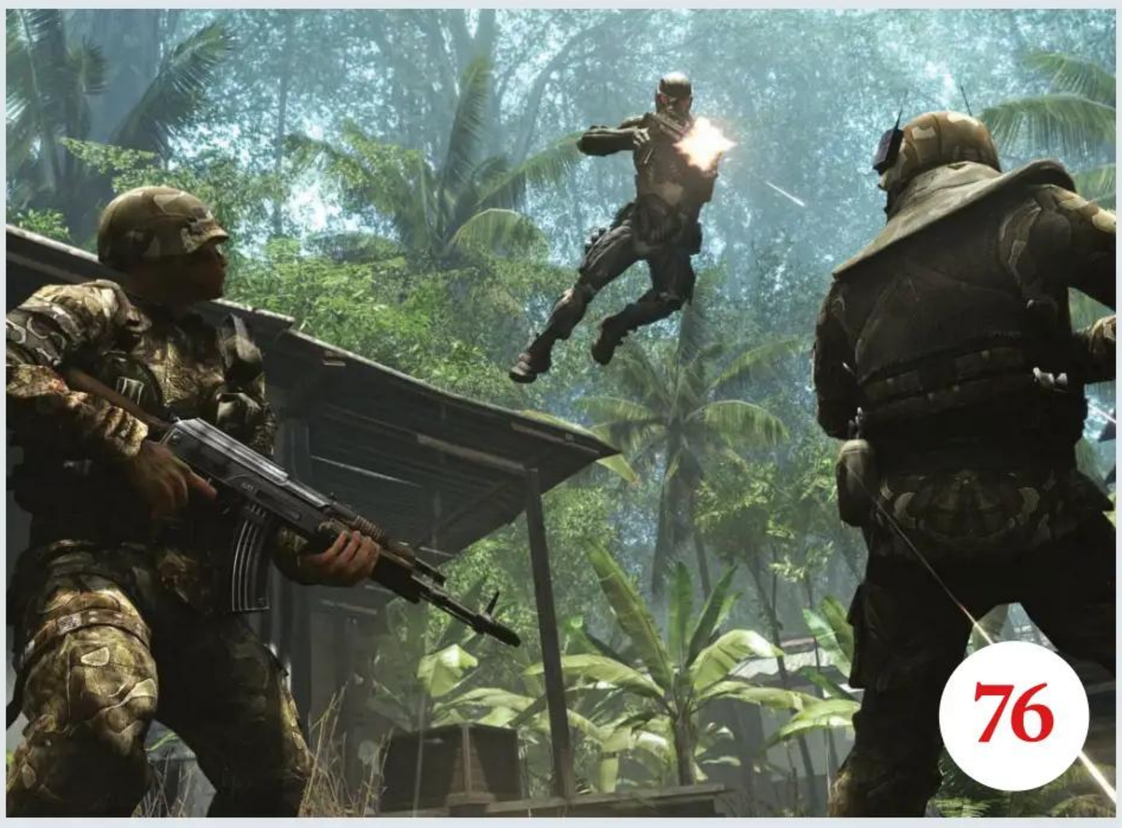
THE HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION

Ian Evenden displayed extreme willpower by walking away from six games of *Civ* to write this feature.



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How a small team's ambitious "stay busy" project turned into *Planescape: Torment*.

PC GAMER

TOP 100

2025

TOP 100 2025

Welcome

With more than one hundred thousand games available on Steam today in 2025, as well as thousands of new games added to that number every year, filtering those games down into a list of just 100 top titles feels a bit doolally.

But here at PC Gamer I think we're all just a little bit crazy (shouldn't everyone be?), and we also have one of the most passionate editorial staff in the gaming industry today.

As such, the PC Gamer team has advocated, fought, and voted for the top 100 games we think are the finest PC gaming experiences in 2025. Ok, maybe we're actually all more than a bit crazy. Enjoy!

ROBERT JONES
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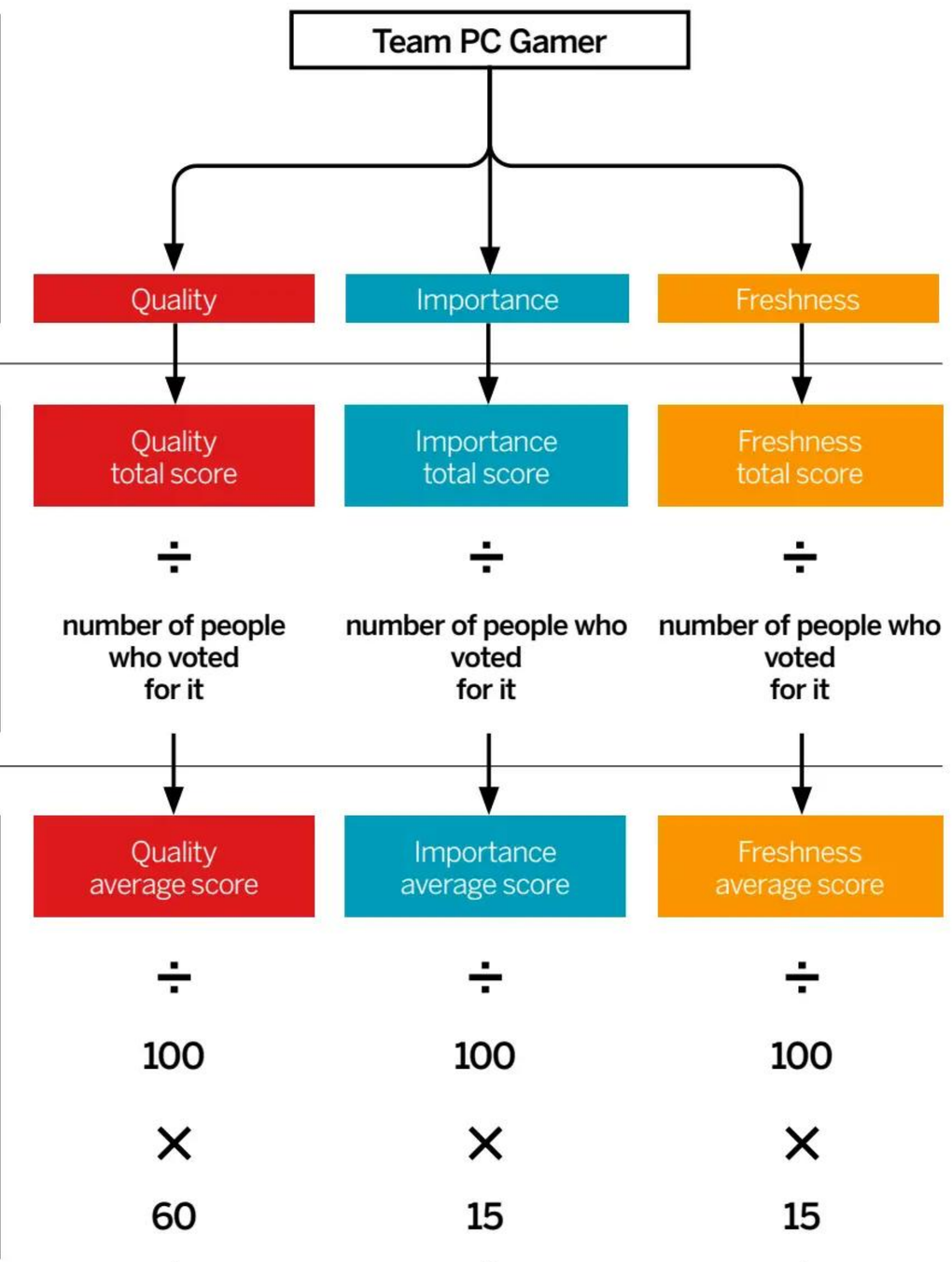
OUR VOTING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

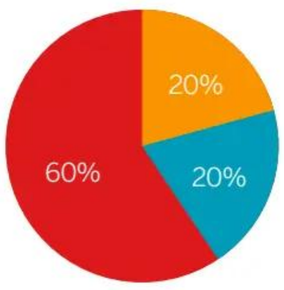
Around 30 of PC Gamer's editors, writers and other staff were invited to rate games based on three categories we deem most important to earn a place in the Top 100. We want to recognise historical importance, how well the game plays today, and also to give space for newer games with fresh ideas. Most importantly, though, we just need to really love each game we pick.

1 PC Gamer's writers vote for their favourite games across three categories.

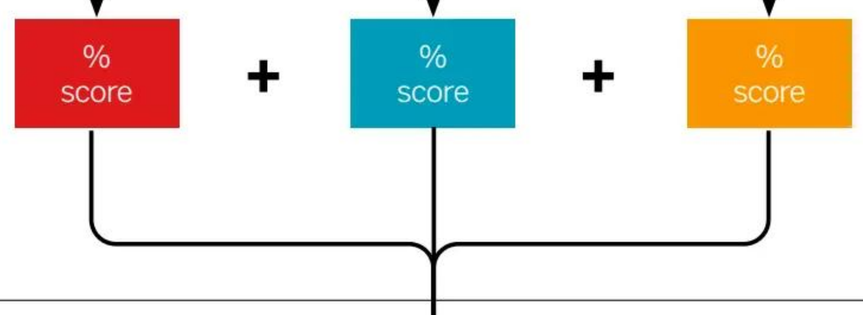


2 The total score for each category is divided by the number of people who voted, to create an average score.

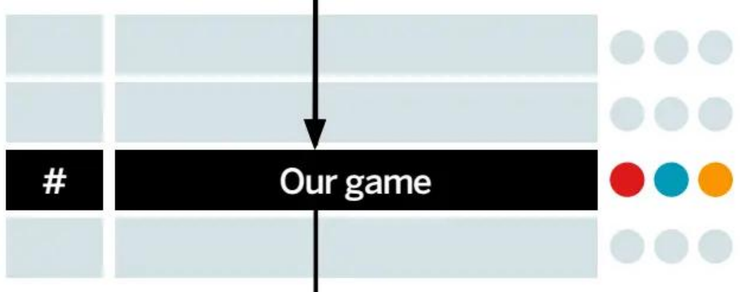
3 The three averages are split according to our special weighting.



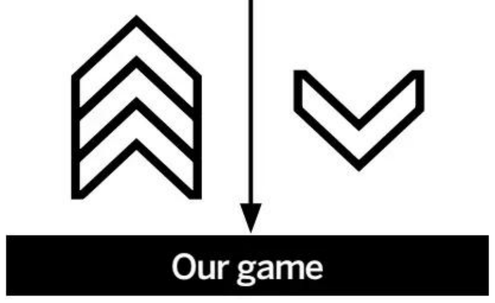
4 The scores are then combined into an official Top 100 score, using maths and secrets.



5 The final scores are put in order to give us our provisional top 100 games list.



6 Writers can then demote or promote one game each, using arguments and democracy.



PERSONAL PICK

Harvey Randall

LIES OF P: OVERTURE

Lies of P: Overture is one of the best soulslike DLCs to ever grace the genre. The base game, which I finally committed to a full playthrough of, is really solid. *Overture*, meanwhile, is peak all the way through—showing us that Round 8 Studios has found its own identity in a sea of imitators. If *Overture* is any indication, Round 8's next game will give FromSoftware a run for its money.

100 UNAVOWED

RELEASED 2018 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 210.6 | **PROMOTED BY** Robin Valentine

Quality 8.75 | Importance 5.75 | Freshness 7.00

Fraser Brown: I'm relieved that *Unavowed* managed to slip in at the end—though it deserves to be much higher. This is Wadjet Eye's best adventure game, and thus simply one of the best adventure game's ever made. A smart, pleasingly tangled supernatural story, a fascinating roster of supernatural investigators—from a hardboiled fire mage to a spirit medium with a tiny BFF—waiting to help you on your cases, clever puzzles that don't outstay their welcome—I love it. If you've got an appetite for urban supernatural affairs like Dresden Files or Constantine, you're gonna have a great time.

I'd be remiss not to mention Wadjet Eye's newest adventure game, though. *Old Skies* didn't make the Top 100, but while it's not quite as bold as *Unavowed*, which has a whole BioWare-adjacent companion system, it's one of the best time travel stories around, with solid puzzles and a story that'll gut punch you.

PERSONAL PICK

Joshua Wolens

UPLINK

Uplink consists of a BBS dialler and a list of IP addresses and somehow it's the best open-world game I've played. It turns you loose, points you at a fake internet, and lets you do whatever the heck you want. Who among us hasn't immediately gotten nabbed by the cops for an ill-judged day-one attempt to hack a bank?

99 CITIES: SKYLINES

RELEASED 2015 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 213.12

Fraser Brown: The recently released sequel has dented the brand a bit, but the original *Cities: Skylines* remains a supremely impressive city builder, regardless, elevated by years of quality DLC and mods. It's better than the follow up in nearly every regard—including being considerably better looking, too. *Cites: Skylines* is an absolute genre classic.

98 AGAINST THE STORM

RELEASED 2023 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 213.8

Evan Lahti: It strikes a perfect balance of resource-accumulation cosiness (bake pies for frogs, brew beavers beer, make your heat-loving lizards extra happy by assigning them to work in a kiln) and managing the looming stress of the storm, which pours on ever-increasing hardships that drive your animal and human villagers away or kill them outright.

TOP 100 2025

97 DAVE THE DIVER

RELEASED 2023 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 218.2

Quality 7.56 | Importance 6.70 | Freshness 7.00

Evan Lahti: This quaint-seeming underwater platformer is actually a bottomless array of features and minigames. "Surely weapon upgrading will be the last feature I unlock," you naively say to yourself before unlocking a photography system, fish farming, seahorse racing, and a multi-hour sea-people storyline. Otherwise, the over-the-top anime cutscenes (one of the DLCs introduces Godzilla) pair well with Dave's coastal calm.

The game's other great stroke of genius was centering that experience on a chubby, middle-aged diver who just wants to retire in tropical bliss. Dave is such an immediately lovable character, a guy who feels like he's just as vaguely bemused by all this weirdness as you are.

96 SHADOWRUN: DRAGONFALL – DIRECTOR'S CUT

RELEASED 2014 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 218.4

Jody Macgregor: I like games where wizards and warriors go into a dungeon, avoid traps, fight monsters, and emerge with a pile of loot, and I also like games where hackers and cyborgs go into a corporation, avoid cameras, fight security guards, and emerge with a cache of data. *Shadowrun: Dragonfall* looks at the similarities between fantasy dungeon crawls and cyberpunk heists, takes one in each hand, and says, "Now kiss!" The result is a turn-based RPG full of warped takes on the clichés. The dragon doesn't demand tribute, they host a talk show and demand attention. The dwarf doesn't craft magic swords, they code leet warez. And the hub's not a fantasy town, it's an anarchist collective in the middle of Berlin.

95 DUSK

RELEASED 2018 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 218.4

Ted Litchfield: The trailblazer of indie boomer shooters is still hard to beat after seven years and hundreds of lo-fi, movement and exploration-heavy FPSes released in its wake. *Dusk* remains fresh and surprising, even on repeat playthroughs. It manages breathtaking visuals that once again show how art direction can trump fidelity. *Dusk* is also very funny.

TOP 100 2025

94

METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO

RELEASED 2024 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 219

Quality 7.78 | Importance 6.58 | Freshness 6.58

Harvey Randall: Not into Persona? I wasn't, either, and it didn't matter—even if you aren't comparing it to some of Atlus' other games, *Metaphor: ReFantazio* stands on its own two leather boots as an excellent JRPG. It's bursting with intriguing fantasy politics, well-written characters, and a main villain I absolutely did not develop a strong crush on. Stop asking.

Fraser Brown: It might not be the highest-ranked JRPG on this list, but I remain convinced *Metaphor* is the greatest JRPG ever made, taking all the good stuff from *Persona 5* and sticking it in a better game. As an added bonus: no more school.

Mollie Taylor: *Persona*'s rag-tag teen shtick is losing its relatability as I barrel into my 30s, which makes me all the more grateful *Metaphor* exists. Fantasy, politics, and a whole heaping of hot villains to love-hate.

93

HOTLINE MIAMI

RELEASED 2012 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 219.2

Jake Tucker: Fast, brutal, and utterly hypnotic, *Hotline Miami* is a game that grabs you by the throat and demands attention. It's a puzzle game at heart, with every room being a conundrum solved only through violence. You slam through doors, batter white-suited Russian gangsters with hammers (and other bits), and do everything in your power to survive in this top-down fever dream of neon, blood, and carnage. It's twitchy, unforgiving and a total headfuck if you pay attention to the story.

All of this is threaded through with a killer soundtrack that pulses through the entire game. Each track doesn't just accompany the violence, it feels like it drives it, surreal electronic music that amps up *Hotline Miami*'s grim atmos.

92

LETHAL COMPANY

RELEASED 2023 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 219.4

Elie Gould: Multiplayer wackiness is at an all-time high right now and that is thanks in large part to this hilarious co-op horror game, which is loaded with quality and laughs. The best part? Zeekerss just gives players all the tools they need to create some zany moments and unforgettable memories and then just stands back and lets everyone get on with it.

91 MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR

RELEASED 2020 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 219.43

Lincoln Carpenter: Alright, so the 2024 edition was pretty donked up. But *MFS* 2020's 1:1 scale virtual Earth remains one of the most impressive technical marvels in videogames, one that's responsible for the closest I've ever come to having a spiritual experience with a controller in my hands: soaring forth and feeling firsthand how terribly small we are.

90 TEAM FORTRESS 2

RELEASED 2007 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 219.6

Rich Stanton: Still the pinnacle of the class-based shooter, the world's premiere hat simulator, and the exemplar of how to build-out and maintain a truly community-driven title. Valve continues to issue periodic updates, too, albeit using crowdsourced content, and every so often still surprises fans by doing things like releasing a new comic.

89 PEAK

RELEASED 2025 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 220.2

Quality 7.50 | Importance 6.40 | Freshness 7.80

Harvey Randall: *Peak* came out of nowhere and climbed to the top of my estimation—it's basically everything you'd want out of its genre of friendship-based co-op fun. You and your friends must ascend while maintaining your stamina, naturally crafting moments of peak physical comedy via the power of positional voice chat and a physics engine that hates you. Or you can just yell at your co-workers. I'm over it, Mollie, don't worry.

Morgan Park: Totally. I also love that *Peak* is adjacent to, but not mimicking, the crop of co-op friendly horror games spawned from *Phasmophobia*. Unlike *Lethal Company* or *REPO*, *Peak* is bright, inviting, and enduringly simple. Yet that doesn't betray a level of skill and coordination needed to clear its highest peaks. You can feel the expertise of two skilled indies in *Peak*. Yes, it was mostly made in a month, but there's high craft here.

Mollie Taylor: Help me up that damn cliff next time, Harvey!

88 THE SIMS 4

TOP 100 SCORE 220.2

Mollie Taylor: Other life sims have attempted to knock *The Sims 4* off its throne (most recently *inZoi*), but it continues to be top dog. If you're willing to look past a small loan's worth of DLC, *The Sims 4* still excels with a well-oiled simulation, and a superb build mode I wish more games would crib from.

87 SUBNAUTICA

TOP 100 SCORE 220.33

Elie Gould: I can't go any deeper than up to my shoulders in the sea so it just goes to show how much I love *Subnautica* for all its beautiful corals, intuitive crafting, and fun base building that I'm able to stomach the sickening thalassophobia. Timeless survival crafting goodness.

86 ROCKET LEAGUE

TOP 100 SCORE 220.5

Joe Donnelly: *Rocket League* is the epitome of 'easy to learn, difficult to master'. At top-level, it's a football-aping sports sim about small cars knocking around a massive ball inside a cage. But beneath this veneer lies a game of skill, tactics, aerial mastery and astute physics manipulation.

85 THANK GOODNESS YOU'RE HERE

RELEASED 2024 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 220.8

Quality 7.90 | Importance 5.50 | Freshness 7.60

Kara Phillips: Still one of the only games that has made me ugly cackle at my PC. I'm still not convinced I understand what a comedy slapformer is, but I know for sure that I want more of them. Especially if Matt Berry is somehow involved. *Thank Goodness You're Here!* is filled with minigames that are as unsettling as they are entertaining.

Phil Savage: It's an absurdist satire, sure, but also incredibly loving in its homage to Northern England. An absolute delight, finally beating out *Jazzpunk* for me as the best comedy on PC.

84 HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

RELEASED 2019 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 221

Rich Stanton: It doesn't feel like Microsoft knows what to do with *Halo* these days, but luckily it got one thing right: *The Master Chief Collection* is the definitive way to enjoy the series' golden years. It's a generous package too: Five superb Bungie titles plus the half-decent *Halo 4*, with multiplayer modes aplenty including co-op and crossplay functionality.

83 ECHO POINT NOVA

RELEASED 2024 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 221

Morgan Park: *Echo Point Nova* is a sprawling open-world FPS for trickshot sickos. It's co-op *Doom* for friends who'd spend entire nights trying to do cool stuff in a Tony Hawk game or *Skate*. It's the "yes and" movement shooter unconcerned with rational speed limits and unapologetically made for a mouse. It's the cure to boomer shooter bloat, all killer, no filler.

Echo Point Nova is a beautiful object that I'm continually impressed by: 1-4 player co-op that's equal parts arena shooter and extreme sports platformer. It's got *Crackdown* agility orbs. You can slap stickers on your hoverboard. There's a modifier to turn on friendly fire, and another that makes the floor lava.

82 CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

RELEASED 2025 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 221.63

Quality 7.53 | Importance 6.90 | Freshness 7.45

Jess Kinghorn: The isolated residents of Lumiere know their days are only ever counting down. Every year the paintress across the sea wakes to inscribe a new number upon her monolith. If you're that age or older, well, time's up and you 'gommage', becoming nothing more than petals upon the breeze.

Staring down this end, the titular expeditioners instead choose to spend their final year of life taking the fight to the paintress through many, many turn-based fights. The twist here is that combat features an element of timing, with perfect parries against nightmarish painted creations netting you devastating counter attacks.

Marinated in the angst of many classic console JRPGs from the early oughts, *Clair Obscur* wrings out its existential set up for all its worth with a cast of party members I'm actually close in age to. This French-developed RPG has since become my whole personality.

81 BLUE PRINCE

RELEASED 2025 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 221.97

Chris Livingston: I never would have guessed there'd be a fresh take on the now-ancient 'walking around a mysterious house solving a bunch of puzzles' genre—but then *Blue Prince* became a nearly year-long obsession for me. Its roguelite elements can be occasionally frustrating, but the depth of the mansion's mysteries make this one of my favorite games.

80 STELLARIS

RELEASED 2016 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 222

Robin Valentine: Though recent DLC and support has been uneven at best, this nearly 10-year-old 4X remains a wonderfully rich and dense simulation of a whole galaxy's worth of life, culture, and inevitably war. At this point in its life, it has almost every sci-fi trope you can imagine covered, playing out like a grand and remarkably coherent mash-up of every space sci-fi series.

PERSONAL PICK

Ted Litchfield

PATHFINDER: WRATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS

WotR saw me through catching Covid, and I think its excellent union of hardcore crunch with BioWare-style comfort food fantasy really presaged *Baldur's Gate 3*. Owlcat has only added to the game since I played a year after launch, and I definitely have to revisit this one to check out all the DLC—and finally try *Rogue Trader*, for that matter.

PERSONAL PICK

Wes Fenlon

NINJA GAIDEN 2 BLACK

The most vicious combat ever in a Japanese action game, finally given the rerelease it deserves in a polished UE5 remaster. You ain't ninja'd until you've sliced three dudes' heads off with a single Flying Swallow or skewered a hellbeast on a scythe as tall as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. The idiom "all killer no filler" was actually invented to describe this game.

79 CULT OF THE LAMB

TOP 100 SCORE 222

Kara Phillips: One of those games you expect to keep you entertained for a couple of hours, but quickly becomes an all consuming entity that perfectly blends cult management and heretic slaying rougelike mechanics. There is nothing better than running your own little cult full of woodland creatures.

78 TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER 3

TOP 100 SCORE 222

Jody Macgregor: The joy of early *TW* games was the zoom. Order a block of soldiers around, then scroll the mousewheel and watch soldiers charge. The game gives us back that joyous spectacle, because when you zoom in it's no longer dudes with spears, it's a bear-rider slamming into hot pink daemons.

77 WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

TOP 100 SCORE 222

Joe Donnelly: What *Remains of Edith Finch* arrived towards the end of the walking sim craze, but it is, for me, the pinnacle of that movement. In telling the titular character's poignant family story, it is one of the most imaginative, creative, thoughtful, heartfelt and truly unpredictable adventures.

76 ALIEN ISOLATION

RELEASED 2014 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 222.32

Rich Stanton: The best licensed game ever? *Alien: Isolation* is one of those rare examples of a game that truly 'gets' the source material, and its setting of Sevastopol is a brilliant slice of retro-futurist design that takes all its cues from the Nostromo while still feeling like its own place. Probably the single best piece of Alien media outside of the first two films.

75 MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD

RELEASED 2018 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 223.13

Wes Fenlon: Oof, it hurts to put *World* here over 2025's *Wilds*, but the newer game's sublime monster-killing action can't overcome its flaws: PC performance, lacking challenge, and promising environment systems it does practically nothing with.

Lincoln Carpenter: While *Wilds* is in need of a redemption arc it may never get, *World* is a complete package.

74 CYBERPUNK 2077

RELEASED 2020 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 218.57 | **PROMOTED BY** Ted Litchfield

Quality 7.67 | Importance 6.81 | Freshness 6.62

Ted Litchfield: Sorry haters, I didn't need a Netflix anime or balance patch to realize a simple truth in December 2020: *Cyberpunk* was always good. Sure, its many patches made it sing, but I took the long view from the start: Many all-timer RPGs (some further down this list) were overambitious, uneven, and technically quite shit at launch. CD Projekt, you watch the streets, Troika will watch the skies.

Night City is a triumph, a union of seriously impressive graphical grunt and brilliant art direction that has *2077* remaining a benchmarker's favourite. *Cyberpunk*'s main quest is better plotted and paced than *The Witcher 3*'s, too, while it continues CDPR's industry-leading standard of quality and quantity for side content. The sidequest centering on a VR recreation of Christ's Passion made out of an actual snuff film is pure Philip K. Dickian sci-fi excellence, and one of my very favorite quests in RPG history.

73 FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT

RELEASED 2012 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 223.41

Quality 7.76 | Importance 7.76 | Freshness 6.18

Morgan Park: Call it nostalgia, but *FTL* is still one of the first roguelikes I'd recommend to friends. Its Star Trek trappings compliment its narrative pit stops perfectly, and I've yet to play a game since that weaponizes door controls.

Evan Lahti: I'm surprised to see it make our list. I think countless roguelikes have made meals out of its ingredients that leave *FTL* looking like the primordial soup of modern roguelikes.

Wes Fenlon: Playing the more recent (also great!) *Cobalt Core* reinforced for me that *FTL* nailed the essentials; there's so much room for panic, disaster, triage, and triumph in the moments you're micromanaging your crew.

Harvey Randall: *FTL*, a game that can be summed up as: Space hates you. Space hates you so much.

72 VAMPIRE SURVIVORS

RELEASED 2022 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 223.57

Wes Fenlon: I'm a certain kind of sucker, and that kind is "put *Castlevania* stuff in a game and I'll play it." *Vampire Survivors* pioneered a certain type of breezy time wasting, but after becoming a smash success it began stacking on secrets, characters, and just more more more. It's generous in a way I haven't seen since *Terraria*. Still, it took the *Castlevania* expansion to make me fall in love.

It offers structure *Vampire Survivors* lacked, with a castle to progress through and a huge cast of heroes to unlock by defeating a lore-appropriate boss or upgrading a key weapon, like a grenade into a rocket launcher. Call it Unlocking Fun Toys: The Game.

71 ALAN WAKE 2

RELEASED 2023 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 224.42

Elie Gould: A truly horrifying experience that somehow makes me feel impressed and grateful for all the wonderful quirky monstrosities as they scare the living daylight out of me.

Kara Phillips: When Elie recommends a horror game, it's always a good move to listen. No one knows horror games like them, and this was one they simply couldn't stop talking about.

PERSONAL PICK

Robin Valentine

DEEP ROCK GALACTIC SURVIVOR

As you read this, this truly excellent take on the *Vampire Survivors* formula will be gearing up for its 1.0 release on September 17. Despite having already lost nearly 100 hours to it in Early Access, I suspect I'm going to be sucked in all over again by the addition of an entire new gear system in the full release.

PERSONAL PICK

Mollie Taylor

FIELDS OF MISTRIA

It may still be in early access, but *Fields of Mistria* is the only farming sim to give me the same fuzzy feelings (and complete time blindness) as *Stardew Valley*. Sprinkle in extra magical girl goodness and a Game Boy Advance-adjacent artstyle, and it stands on its own as a ridiculously cosy experience. Plus, it's perfect on the Steam Deck.

70 SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY

RELEASED 2005 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 224.57

Quality 8.14 | Importance 6.86 | Freshness 6.14

Morgan Park: Our staff tends to skew toward the Looking Glass lineage of stealth games, but Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory is the sneak-'em-up I keep installed for a rainy day. The controls are a bit weird now, but Chaos Theory is still unmatched in terms of pure sneaking. Sam Fisher's dynamic crouching animations build tension when approaching guards, and Michael Ironside's commanding performance is still a treat.

But really, it's the levels that make *Chaos Theory* an amazing replay to this day. The cargo ship, the bank, Hokkaido—Ubisoft just nailed it on the third go-around. What stands out about *Chaos Theory* now, and why I still consider it fresh compared to today's stealth genre, is its tight, linear encounter design that offers multiple solutions without giving so much freedom that challenge is optional (the *Far Cry* and *MGSV* approach).

68 RESIDENT EVIL 2 (REMAKE)

RELEASED 2019 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 224.73

Joe Donnelly: Survival horror has made some phenomenal strides in recent years, with a deluge of remakes reimagining a golden era of the genre for newer audiences. *The Resident Evil 2* remake is pretty much responsible for that, taking us back in time with Leon Kennedy and Claire Redfield as they fight to survive Raccoon City's zombie apocalypse.

69 GRAND THEFT AUTO 5 ENHANCED

RELEASED 2023 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 224.73

Joe Donnelly: *Grand Theft Auto 5* is the best open-world crime simulator out there today. Driven in part by the success of its now standalone offshoot *GTA Online*, *GTA 5* has shown remarkable staying power—with its Legacy and Enhanced editions both staples of Steam's most played charts. *GTA 6* is coming, but, right now, *GTA 5* still ain't going anywhere.

67 DEEP ROCK GALACTIC

RELEASED 2020 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 225

Quality 7.80 | Importance 7.10 | Freshness 7.00

Robin Valentine: *DRG*'s popularity isn't just enduring, it's wonderfully enthusiastic—no other online multiplayer community is anywhere near as relentlessly positive. And I really think that's a reflection of the kind of game *DRG* is.

It's not just about coordinated violence, it's about true cooperation—working together to creatively solve tricky problems. And thanks to some of the best deployed procedural generation in the industry, those problems are ever-fresh, as you discover unique and surprising environments with your fellow dwarves.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere of blue collar camaraderie and the entirely uncynical progression system wonderfully foster a sense of genuine dwarven pride. Rock and stone, to the bone.

Rory Norris: Did I hear a rock and stone?

66 MASS EFFECT LEGENDARY EDITION

RELEASED 2021 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 225.16

Robert Jones: The fact that this remastered trilogy is frequently going for five bucks/pounds on Steam is just ridiculous, as it delivers the definitive way to play the entire *Mass Effect* trilogy, which remains buckets of fun today in 2025. Yes, sure, the trilogy's quite clunky third-person cover shooting now feels a little dated, and the whole Paragon/Renegade morality system is childishly simple, but the world, characters and writing remain great reasons to board the Normandy.

Tyler Wilde: The military conspiracy plot is a bit more *Call of Duty* than I would've admitted back in the day, but the *Mass Effect* trilogy is still, even now in 2025, the most I've felt like the Picard of a little spaceship.

65 COUNTER-STRIKE 2

RELEASED 2012 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 225.4

Rich Stanton: *Counter-Strike 2* is a very Valve game. It's billed as the first true sequel in series history, but it's really more about being the definitive version of the same competitive shooter we've been playing for decades, with the focus on improvements to things like smoke physics, UI and contemporary quality-of-life features.

TOP 100 2025

64

DIABLO 2

RELEASED 2000 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 225.55

Quality 7.36 | Importance 9.00 | Freshness 6.50

Tyler Wilde: I'm still not convinced that this genre is better with flashier lighting effects, non-stop rebalancing patches, and battle passes. The *Diablo 2: Resurrected* remaster is excellent if you want a more modern (but not too modern) way to play through a classic ARPG adventure that came out before hell had to be experienced through a film of live service cruft.

Jake Tucker: *Diablo 2 Resurrected* made basically no changes and proved good design is eternal. Later *Diablo* titles always have a "but" in there somewhere, but *Diablo 2* is astonishingly fun, letting you steamroll entire dungeons for the sweet, sweet loot within.

63 GARRY'S MOD

RELEASED 2006 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 225.82

Phil Savage: I used to spend long hours surfing *Garry's Mod*'s server browser, just to see what strange, esoteric game modes I could find—like a hyperspecific Quantum Leap themed entirely around *Half-Life 2* assets and late-'00s internet humour. Maybe this time I'm a watermelon, racing other watermelons across an abstract obstacle course suspended in the air. Next time it could be anything—RP, bunnyhop platforming, zombie horde shooting, whatever the server owner had cobbled together.

Elie Gould: I went to dinner with some mates the other day, and it quickly just devolved into us talking about how much we miss playing Trouble in Terrorist Town. Thanks *Garry's Mod*!

62 STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II

RELEASED 2004 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 226

Robert Jones: Still, twenty years later, the most interesting Star Wars game ever made, as well as a fantastic (albeit unfinished) RPG. Some of the characters, but notably Kreia, are GOAT territory, and they're brought to life by mature and challenging writing that takes the Star Wars universe into areas no other Star Wars game, TV show, or film has done.

61 YAKUZA 0

RELEASED 2018 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 226.2

Jody Macgregor: If somebody walks in at the wrong time they can get the wrong idea about a game. To my girlfriend, *Yakuza 0* is that game where you help weirdoes who want to be tough. Only she's right. I've heard "real fans" care about the plot and the oddball substories aren't a big deal. Real fans can get lost: *Yakuza 0* is about helping a kid buy a spank mag.

60 ARMA 3

RELEASED 2013 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 226.61

Andy Edser: Few games are as crunchy as *Arma 3*, and that's probably a good thing. Twist your fingers around the unforgiving interface and put up with the woeful performance, however, and you'll find the milsim to end all milsims. It's the best "hike for two hours before being shot in a bush" simulator on the market, and at least one of those should make this list, right?

59 SATISFACTORY

RELEASED 2024 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 227.14

Quality 7.86 | Importance 6.86 | Freshness 7.43

Wes Fenlon: *Satisfactory* is a building game about optimization in the same way that eating is about ingesting calories. You could take the most boring path to efficiency, but wouldn't you rather spend weeks designing a series of artfully suspended conveyor belts that deliver pizzas straight into your mouth? Why live off chicken and broccoli when you could build a tower taller than god whose only purpose is producing the exact number of ingredients needed to assemble one perfect al pastor burrito every 15 seconds?

...It's possible this metaphor has gone way off track. But that's what *Satisfactory* is all about really: devoting hours to silly, elaborate, or mathematically precise constructs in whatever form you find creatively nourishing. Harnessing a huge open world sandbox of resources to graduate from making iron bars up to non-fusile uranium sometimes first requires building an elevated train network from one corner of the planet to the other, y'know?

58 STALKER: CALL OF PRYPIAT

TOP 100 SCORE 227.17

Joshua Wolens: Some of us want to be the heroes of grand, sweeping fantasy narratives. Others want to be shot to death for a tin of Spam in a world that doesn't care about you. *Call of Prypiat*'s ever-lovable, ever-janky Zone is the home of the latter camp, at least while GSC finishes cooking *Stalker 2*.

57 NIER: AUTOMATA

TOP 100 SCORE 227.6

Harvey Randall: Listen, I think we've all probably hopped on the 'haha, game with sexy androids' train when it comes to *Nier: Automata*. Behind that gentle mockery, though, is the understanding that Yoko Taro made one of the most effective, haunting, and unique action RPGs out there.

56 SYSTEM SHOCK 2

TOP 100 SCORE 228

Joshua Wolens: Sorry to JC Denton, but *System Shock 2* is my favourite imsim of all time. Its pitch-perfect horror, innumerable secrets, endless character builds, and absolutely unhinged techno soundtrack combine to produce a game I'll never stop coming back to as long as I live.

TOP 100 2025

55 THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN IDOL

RELEASED 2022 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 228

Quality 7.80 | Importance 7.20 | Freshness 7.40

Robin Valentine: Wonderfully intricate detective puzzles unfold into a bizarre and fascinating narrative spanning decades of alternate history. Also, everyone has the most brilliantly ugly faces you've ever seen.

Christopher Livingston: I know we sometimes play a game and think it would make a great movie (and we're almost always wrong) but I would absolutely love to see Color Gray Games' adventure turned into a book. The story—the complete story we slowly piece together while solving bizarre murders—would be perfect for a sprawling, gritty, gruesome novel about a mysterious item that inspires brutality and backstabbery among any who possess it.

54 THE ELDER SCROLLS 3: MORROWIND

RELEASED 2002 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 228.14

Joshua Wolens: The last time Bethesda felt like it had something to say. *Morrowind* is a (spice) melange of influences ranging from Dune to The Dark Crystal, filled with murky morality and strange politics and set in one of the few fantasy worlds that feel actually fantastical. Also you can get so hopped up on Dunmer drugs you can kill god with a single blow.

53 PAPERS, PLEASE

RELEASED 2013 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 228.33

Wes Fenlon: I talked to creator Lucas Pope about how now this game feels, and he said that "You want your work to be relevant, but at the same time, wow, I really wish it was not that fucking relevant." If *Papers, Please* convinces even 0.1% of the people who play it that the global right-wing backlash against immigrants and asylum seekers is deeply wrong, it will be one of the most important videogames ever made.

Joe Donnelly: Few games evoke the 'life imitating art vs art imitating life' dichotomy quite like *Papers, Please*, and that's terrifying unto itself. But from a purely video game perspective, Lucas Pope's breakout hit is a super-smart management sim.

52 TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX SIEGE X

RELEASED 2015 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 228.43

Quality 7.86 | Importance 7.63 | Freshness 6.88

Morgan Park: When *Rainbow Six Siege* launched disastrously in 2015, folks were understandably ready to write it off. But Ubisoft knew it had something genuinely unique on its hands, and ten years of updates later, *Siege* really has never been better.

The *Siege X* update (bad name, Ubisoft, go back to the old one) took a big swing by adding *Siege*'s first new primary mode since launch: Dual Front is a 6v6 twist on *Siege* where teams have to attack and defend at the same time. I never thought I'd be in favour of a Siege mode with respawns, but here we are.

Tyler Wilde: I still haven't played another multiplayer shooter that makes swinging through a window or smashing through a wall as fun.

51 DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

RELEASED 2009 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 228.6

Robert Jones: A landmark fantasy RPG which, on release, laid the foundation for the genre for years to come. With funny and moving writing, an exquisite dark fantasy tone, GOAT characters like Witch of the Wilds, Morrigan, and full-fat RPG systems that let you play the game your way, *Origins* remains the best *Dragon Age* experience and a must-play for fantasy RPG fans.

50 SID MEIER'S ALPHA CENTAURI

RELEASED 1999 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 229.2

Fraser Brown: Forget *Civ*, folks, *Alpha Centauri* is still the best 4X Firaxis has ever made. The exceptional faction design, unusual setting and simmering sci-fi story have kept this a must-play for decades. Please play it—the drones need you. Few other studios have attempted to continue this mostly-dead evolutionary thread, with the exception of the brilliant *Endless Legend*.

PERSONAL PICK

Evan Lahti

MONSTER TRAIN 2

A more-is-more counterpoint to *Slay the Spire*'s relative austereness in the deckbuilder genre. I love assembling an ugly menagerie of squid women, immortal ooze piles, melting Victorian candle children, actual demons, and mushroom soldiers. Each night I load these weirdos into separate rooms of a three-story train to reclaim heaven. Perfect soundtrack, big replayability, inventive factions, and more content on the way.

PERSONAL PICK

Lincoln Carpenter

EARTH DEFENSE FORCE 5

EDF looks like shit, the voice acting is awful, the developers have been using the same assets since 2006, and it fucking rules. It's a series carried solely by the unembellished truth that it's fun to shoot 6 million giant ants with your friends. It's one of the purest demonstrations that a game need not be pretty to be excellent.

49 PERSONA 5 ROYAL

TOP 100 SCORE 229.27

Mollie Taylor: Atlus continues to milk the Phantom Thieves for all their worth, and for good reason: *Persona 5 Royal* is a truly top-notch JRPG with an excellent cast, banging soundtrack, and meticulously-designed dungeons that put it a step above its predecessors. The *Persona* to play today.

48 FINAL FANTASY X/X-2 HD

TOP 100 SCORE 229.29

Andrea Shearon: Truly the last *Final Fantasy* of its kind, *FF10* and its sequel bookend an era of series greats that started with *FF6* in the '90s and refused to slow down for decades. The remastered RPG lost some of the original art direction's charm, but Yuna's selfless pilgrimage is Square Enix in its prime.

47 VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES

TOP 100 SCORE 229.85

Ted Litchfield: I always try to sell *Bloodlines* to potential converts as a prototype *New Vegas*, translating the flexible RPG design of 2D *Fallout* to full 3D. But it also delivers an unforgettable atmosphere the likes of which we may never see again in games. A gothic vampire fantasy.

46 WILDERMYTH

RELEASED 2021 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 231.33

Robin Valentine: It's really remarkable how rich the stories *Wildermyth*'s layered systems churn out are, as you travel across the map and fight tense turn-based battles. Characters grow, change, accomplish greatness, suffer hardship, and if they're lucky retire and have children who go on to have their own adventures. And sometimes they get turned into a frog-man.

45 STRAFTAT

RELEASED 2024 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 232

Evan Lahti: Slapstick *Quake*. *Straftat* is the world's only French 1v1 FPS that features cigarettes as cosmetic DLC, a brutalist playground that you bring variously clownish and exotically violent weapons into. There are an uncountable number of maps: some feel like *Mario Party*, others like a fighter jet duel. A generous July update added 1v1v1v1 and 2v2. Best free FPS on Steam.

44 INTO THE BREACH

RELEASED 2018 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 232.8

Quality 8.20 | Importance 7.50 | Freshness 6.70

Evan Lahti: This is the most playable turn-based game on PC. Deploying teams of giant robots that move in different chess-piece patterns (appropriately, on an 8x8 grid), *Into the Breach* asks you to defend Earth's few remaining cities from waves of kaiju monsters. The game's achievement is the disproportionate amount of strategic thinking it draws out of the three humble units you control (my favorite is the Judo mech, which suplexes monsters over its head). On Unfair difficulty, every round is a set of life-or-death decisions against Deep Blue Mothra. Ben Prunty's soundtrack does heavy lifting to make pixel art feel cinematic and somber.

Phil Savage: *Into the Breach*'s great trick is telling you exactly what your opponent is about to do. If you can't kill an enemy this turn, maybe you can use your mech squad's abilities to manipulate your foes in such a way that all their attacks miss and nothing is destroyed. That's the dream, but in practice it means a lot of hard choices and sacrifice.

TOP 100 2025

43 THE STANLEY PARABLE: ULTRA DELUXE

RELEASED 2022 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 232.92

Quality 8.13 | Importance 7.00 | Freshness 7.44

Harvey Randall: Harvey sat down to write a few dozen words about *The Stanley Parable*, but as he put his fingers to his keyboard, he realised it'd be a mighty task indeed to convey how its omnipresent narrator is one of the best running gags in all of videogames. He chose, instead, to write a pale imitation of him, as though it might liven his copy up a bit. Really, he should've mentioned that *The Stanley Parable* is almost singular in how much unapologetic fun it has with its premise, sprinkled with just a touch of existential dread.

42 KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

RELEASED 2015 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 233.13

Phil Savage: *Kerbal Space Program* is the perfect distillation of two of my favourite things: space exploration and abject failure. It's a sandbox about building rockets—all complex physics and advanced mathematics—but from the perspective of silly, slapstick critters. The onus is always more on doing than thinking. Slapping together a some parts, shooting your creation into space, and learning from the inevitable.

The joy has always been striving for the next big milestone. Go to space, reach the nearest moon, land on the nearest moon, and so on. Maybe one day I'll even set my sights on the biggest challenge of all: Rescuing the many, many Kerbals that I've left stranded up in space.

41 HOLLOW KNIGHT

RELEASED 2017 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 233.45

Kara Phillips: I do wonder if the eventual launch of *Silksong* will knock our high praise for *Hollow Knight* down a notch, but let's be real. Nothing will beat that initial feeling of being utterly lost in Hallownest. Or, if you're anything like me, the frustration of frequently failing to beat the Mantis Lords. Seriously, the amount of times I've had to step away from this game.

PERSONAL PICK

Rich Stanton

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SHREDDER'S REVENGE

My 2025 highlight is my young son's discovery of this game. He's not very good at it, and I'll be damned before I let my kid get battered by the Foot: so I've become great at defending Raphael in co-op, softening up baddies, and annihilating bosses with Radical Mode before they can lay a claw on my boy. Then we high-five, say "Cowabunga!", and start the next level.

PERSONAL PICK

Phil Savage

ANNO 1800

I could lie to you and pretend that my many hours in *Anno 1800* were in pursuit of creating a beautiful Georgian city, taking simple pleasure in the aesthetic thrill of a thriving industrial metropolis. But no, in reality I'm here for the sicko shit: complex production chains pumping out everything from telephones to bowler hats at peak economic efficiency.

40 PILLARS OF ETERNITY II: DEADFIRE

RELEASED 2018 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 234

Quality 8.83 | Importance 5.83 | Freshness 6.67

Joshua Wolens: Obsidian made the best CRPG of the last decade in 2018, and then no one played it. The sequel to *Pillars* swapped out the OG's Faerûn-style rolling green plains for Caribbean colonialism, putting you smack-bang in the middle of factions competing for the rights to control and exploit the Deadfire region and forcing you to decide which one you can tolerate most. Oh, and you're pursuing a resurrected god who's inhabited a 300-metre-tall statue that used to live beneath your house. That's also a problem, sure.

Andy Edser: Having put far too many hours into this fantasy pirate simulator feels like having played one of PC gaming's best kept secrets at this point. It's not perfect, but I'd personally rate it higher than the original.

39 HUNT: SHOWDOWN 1896

RELEASED 2019 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 234.32

Evan Lahti: What earns this horror-cowboy extraction shooter a recurring spot in the Top 100 is how extraordinarily organic its gunfights are. When you stumble on another team in one of *Hunt*'s forests, it feels truly spontaneous because you used your eyes and ears to find them, not UI. I love the way its generally slow-firing, *1896* weaponset gives firefights rhythm.

38 SLAY THE SPIRE

RELEASED 2019 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 234.58

Harvey Randall: Listen. I know we're all sick of roguelike deckbuilders and that we're tired of diving in for one more run—but you have to give it up for *Slay the Spire*. A game so deliciously moreish that it kicked an entire genre into the stratosphere. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then *Slay the Spire* is being flooded with smutty letters from every indie dev.

37 HITMAN WORLD OF ASSASSINATION

RELEASED 2022 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 234.62

Quality 8.25 | Importance 7.65 | Freshness 6.71

Fraser Brown: A grand tour of exotic locations filled with terrible people waiting to be creatively murdered. I love it so much that I'm willing to wear a suit to work.

Lincoln Carpenter: What I deeply love about modern *Hitman* is how smoothly it transforms you into a sicko. The signposted mission stories don't just serve up ideal assassination opportunities. They act as a survey course for later lethal experimentation: You might pass by more wrenches, chef's knives, body dumpsters, and conveniently unattended drinking glasses than you'll need at the moment, but they'll be part of your arsenal when you return for future murders.

36 MAX PAYNE

RELEASED 2001 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 235

Tyler Wilde: Remedy's classic third-person shooter is such a perfect crystallization of the turn-of-the-millennium action genre: The fixation on slow-motion and flying debris, the comic book influence (before everything credited comics), the sulky noir tone that you can't quite call parody, even if it is purposefully too much. Ragdolls went out of fashion too quickly, as did fight scenes in tile-walled subway stations and the sort of fourth-wall-breaking seen in The Matrix's distorted green WB logo and *Max Payne*'s in-character quit screen messages ("I was afraid to go on"). *Max Payne* is a kinetic shooter that is actually a series of very violent puzzles to solve.

35 SPELUNKY

RELEASED 2013 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 235.04

Evan Lahti: As you descend deeper into this platformer, *Spelunky* makes you feel perpetual precarity. The many randomly-arranged dangers along your path makes reaching its many secrets incredibly sweet. To gain access to the City of Gold, you have to find Egyptian artifacts in painstaking fashion, then die and be resurrected on a specific level in order to discover the entrance.

TOP 100 2025

34

HADES

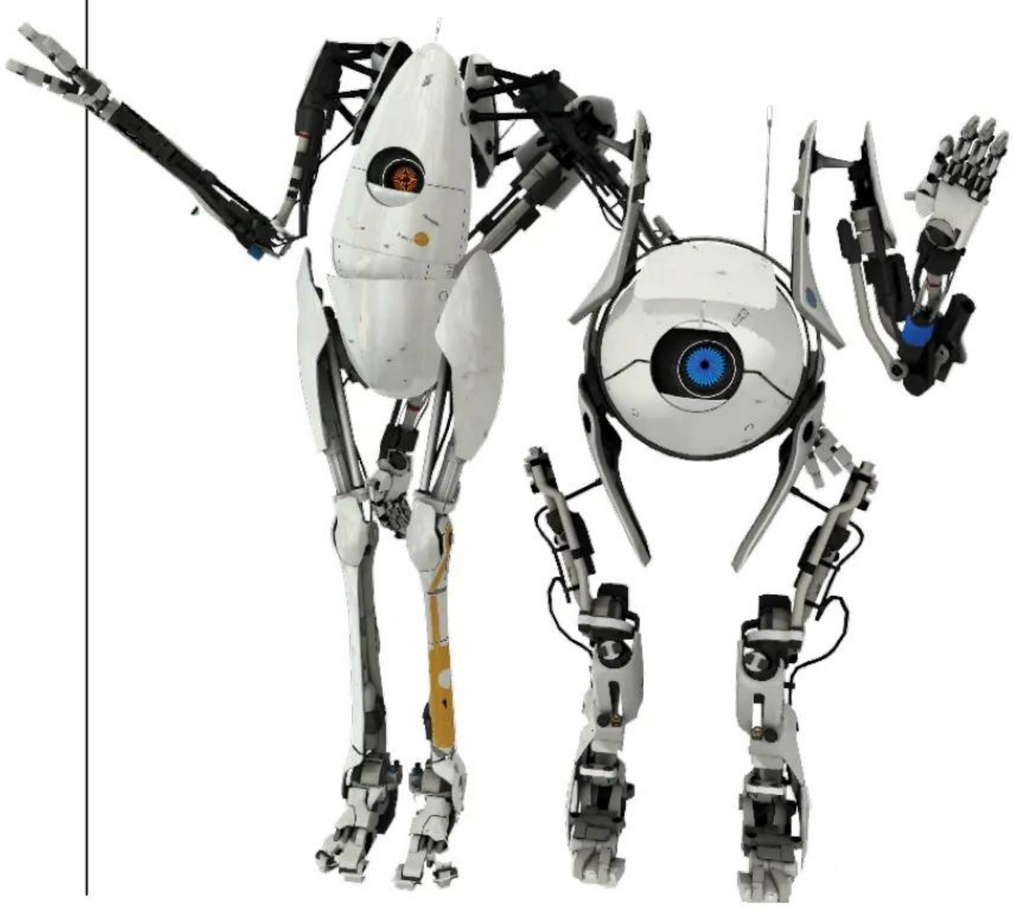
RELEASED 2020 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 235.73

Quality 8.20 | Importance 7.88 | Freshness 6.81

Harvey Randall: A game that's had an impact on roguelikes similar to *Slay the Spire* in terms of heft, *Hades* is basically the platonic ideal of what it is: An isometric action RPG with roguelike elements, polished to a mirror shine. A novel narrative structure, gorgeous artwork, charming voice acting, thoughtfully executed character work, and the unmatched tunes of Darren Korb. I don't know what Supergiant's feeding its composer, but he keeps getting stronger.

Wes Fenlon: *Hades* rules, but I think you should actually be playing *Hades 2* right now—it's already bigger and more varied, and includes a grenade launcher that fires flaming demon skulls.

Harvey Randall: Wes, you forgot to mention the siren band that makes a diss track just for you.

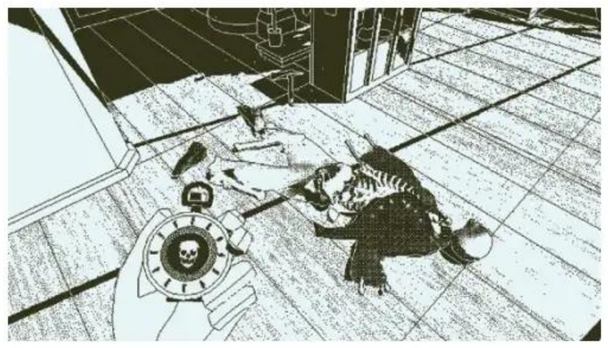


33 PORTAL 2

RELEASED 2011 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 236.29

Robin Valentine: I can understand why some prefer the purity of the first game, but *Portal 2* just adds so many fantastic, creative ideas to the formula. Puzzles that push the absolute limits of thinking with portals, a genuinely hilarious story, and just so much more to see, do, and play with.

Often overlooked is the multiplayer. For my money, it's one of the best co-op campaigns ever made—if you've never played it, you owe it to yourself to rope in a friend and give it a go. It is precision engineered to create 'A ha!' moments that are so joyful to discover with a partner, fully leveraging the wild potential of not just two portal guns, but the physical presence of two characters.



32 RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

RELEASED 2018 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 236.57

Rich Stanton: A mystery game that is actually a mystery, and an environment so densely packed with secrets and discoveries that by the end you feel you've holidayed there. Well, if your holidays involve the unspeakable horrors of the sea. Nothing else looks or plays like *Obra Dinn*, and few games have the confidence to demand as much from players.

31 METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER

RELEASED 2023 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 237

Joshua Wolens: Hideo Kojima brings us the most personal story in the entire *Metal Gear* series. Big Boss' origin story is a mad tearjerker about soldiers caught between duty, survival, and a large man who shoots lightning from his fingertips—but it's the doomed relationship between Snake and his mentor, The Boss, that has us coming back to this one decades later.

30 FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

RELEASED 2010 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 237.36

Joshua Wolens: Rockstar can model all the horse anatomy it wants to, but this is the best cowboy game ever made. The historical storytelling that defines Obsidian started here with a story about a land on the periphery of two empires torn apart as they compete for the right to exploit it. That land is literally Las Vegas, too, which means you get to listen to a load of Rat Pack music.

28 NINE SOLS

TOP 100 SCORE 237.6

Harvey Randall: I finally got my coworkers to play this, and every one had the same reaction I did in 2024: "How'd it take me so long?" *Nine Sols* is an entrant into the *Sekiro*-like genre that utterly flies off the screen. It's beautiful, tightly written, and immaculately designed, despite its dev mostly making horror games.

27 HELLDIVERS 2

TOP 100 SCORE 237.75

Lincoln Carpenter: Arrowhead Games leveraged physics simulation, orchestral bombast, hyperbolic sociopolitical satire, obsessive attention to ordnance audiovisuals, community-driven metafiction, award-worthy commitment to the bit, and 23 years of expertise in generating slapstick co-op mayhem.

29 PENTIMENT

RELEASED 2022 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 237.43

Quality 8.43 | Importance 6.71 | Freshness 7.57

Fraser Brown: *Pentiment* is one of those rare adventure games that actually make you feel like an investigator—though not necessarily a very good one. **Jody Macgregor:** It's something videogames can handle other media would struggle with. You can only do 'Sherlock doesn't know what happened' as comedy on TV, but videogames can play that straight because the protagonist, in this case Andreas the illuminator, is actually just some gamer. While Andreas is a Renaissance man in the literal sense, a man who lives in the Renaissance, he's playing detective because he's a literate outsider, not some crime genius. You're investigating murder in a 16th century village without modern forensics or a police badge, and you won't get everything right. You won't even know what you got wrong and just have to send people to be executed based on scraps of evidence and gap-filling guesswork. You're just a little man who looks like marginalia doing his best in the world he finds himself in.

26 DEUS EX

TOP 100 SCORE 250

Jake Tucker: *Deus Ex* endures because it gave players unprecedented freedom. Missions had multiple paths—stealth, hacking, brute force— and making choices between them felt meaningful. Its cyberpunk world was rich, conspiratorial, and eerily prescient. Few games offer such wild, untamed ambition.

TOP 100 2025

25

DISHONORED 2

RELEASED 2016 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 238.36

Quality 8.50 | Importance 7.41 | Freshness 6.82

Robert Jones: Whisper it quietly, but *Dishonored 2* is the best immersive sim ever made. The level of control and choice you have in this game to play it your way, and to experiment and get rewarded for your ingenuity, is top tier and takes its replayability to crazy levels. *Dishonored 2* is exceptional for many other reasons, too, such as its beautifully realised world and characters, its jaw-dropping level design (A Crack in the Slab, anyone?), its slick and empowering combat, its mature themes and its engaging narrative that asks you the question: truly, how far would you go to get your revenge?

24

DARK SOULS REMASTERED

RELEASED 2011 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 239

Lincoln Carpenter: In 2011, FromSoft taught gamers that deliberate attack animations can be fun, and the world was forever changed—largely for the better, if you like parrying stuff. While there's a bit of *Dark Souls* in just about every third-person action game now, it's worth revisiting to appreciate just how little FromSoft's design ethos has changed.

23

UNDERTALE

RELEASED 2015 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 239.4

Kara Phillips: A game that always makes you feel the same as when you first played it. The soundtrack, characters, and story as a whole stick with you from the very moment you get your first taste of Butterscotch Pie and beyond. Somehow, everyone I know who's played *Undertale* has somehow perfectly timed it with a time they needed some serious comfort, which is exactly what it offers. If you're ever in need of a good emotional outlet, *Undertale* always has your back.

Morgan Park: An underrated aspect of *Undertale* is its combat, or ideally lack thereof. I love that you can commit to meeting a character's anger with kindness, even if that means taking a heavy beating.

22 DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II

RELEASED 2017 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 239.67

Quality 8.39 | Importance 7.72 | Freshness 7.06

Ted Litchfield: I'm glad *Original Sin II* is still on the list, even with its younger sibling ranked higher up—it's not just the game you play after *Baldur's Gate III* if you want more Larian. Much as I love The Forgotten Realms and D&D, Larian's own worldbuilding and bespoke mechanics are something special.

The studio gleefully spits on continuity, spinning a yarn that directly contradicts the events of past *Divinities*, but who cares, nerd? The combat's focus on stripping enemy defenses while maintaining your own is like no other RPG I've played, and I hope Larian revisits the concept with fresh eyes and hard-won knowledge soon™.

Morgan Park: I have 80.6 hours in *Divinity II*, and at least 70 of those were spent running Fort Joy across six abandoned playthroughs. I have a soft spot for *Divinity II*'s chaotic combat where the floor is always lava, but I just keep running out of gas.

21 PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

RELEASED 1999 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 240.75

Ted Litchfield: *Disco Elysium* may be the gold standard for this type of RPG, but its inspiration still has the juice. I'm in it for the little moments in this story of an amnesiac immortal, like paying your past self's bar tab to get the eyeball he left as collateral, then gruesomely gouging out your current eye to plop in the old one, unlocking buried memories.

20 MINECRAFT

RELEASED 2011 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 241.04

Elie Gould: I still can't get over how *Minecraft* managed to make a mundane act of hitting rocks so much fun that it's still going strong over a decade later. As the dedicated rock smasher on any server I'm in, I approve this message.

Morgan Park: A *Minecraft* server with friends (and mods!) is still one of the great PC gaming experiences.

PERSONAL PICK

Tyler Wilde

ZORK: GRAND INQUISITOR

The game that came with my first DVD-ROM drive. It's not too long, contains genuinely good gags, and when the puzzles are BS, they're BS in a funny way. (There's a spell that turns purple things invisible.) They never made another *Zork* game after this one, which is sad, but at least the series went out on a high note.

PERSONAL PICK

Christopher Livingston

THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

Scandalous that I have to burn my personal pick just to get *Skyrim* in the top 100 conversation! But, I get it. It's dated and creaky and there are so many deeper options for RPGs these days—but *Skyrim*'s sandbox remains unmatched (especially when modded) when it comes to giving you the freedom to create characters and adventures that are truly your own.

19 THIEF GOLD

TOP 100 SCORE 241.2

Jody Macgregor: You'll have to remap the controls and be aware some missions added in this edition aren't as good as the originals, but quibbles aside, *Thief* is still top-tier stealth. The levels are diverse yet never gimmicky, something others in the genre could learn from. A film-noir fantasy thriller.

18 PREY

TOP 100 SCORE 242.62

Joshua Wolens: Kinda weird how someone's out there making *System Shock 3* when Arkane already made it. *Prey* is a special thing: a jumble of systems and pathways that's more than happy to let you pick your own, strange route through it. It's not as tight as *Dishonored*, but it makes it up with its incredible openness.

17 RIMWORLD

TOP 100 SCORE 244

Andy Edser: I'd like to write about *Rimworld*'s intricate dance of systems, its chaotic yet beautiful, ballet-like emergence, but I'd be doing it an injustice. The reason I play *Rimworld* is to see which of my colonists will eat each other first—and that's a compliment. It's a gripping post-apocalyptic hell sim.

16 SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE

RELEASED 2019 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 244.36

Harvey Randall: I'm smug beyond belief that we ranked this above *Dark Souls* this year. The *Souls* that launched a thousand -likes will always sleep easy in my git-gud heart, but *Sekiro* is peerless. From's RPGs offer build expression, but if you've not played *Sekiro* you haven't seen what it can do when it narrows its focus to a honed, thrice-folded nippon edge.

15 HALF-LIFE 2

RELEASED 2004 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 255.42

Robert Jones: Despite starting to creak somewhat, with many of its once-pioneering qualities since built on and, occasionally, improved on by subsequent games, there's no doubting that *Half-Life 2* remains an FPS of immense quality, replayability and foresight. Yes, it lacks the incredible opening of the original *Half-Life*, but it then delivers a stronger overall game.

14 BALDUR'S GATE II: ENHANCED

RELEASED 2000 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 244.8

Quality 8.90 | Importance 8.40 | Freshness 5.70

Robert Jones: Every time I hear David Warner deliver the lines of Jon Irenicus, *Baldur's Gate II*'s incredibly memorable villain, I get chills, as it sums up the immense quality that pours forth out of this game at all moments. From defiant statements such as, 'I cannot be caged. I cannot be controlled. Understand this as you die', through to philosophical musings on the meaning of existence, such as, 'Life... is strength. That is not to be contested; it seems logical enough. You live; you affect your world', and onto despair-laden realisations like, 'I... I do not remember your love, Ellesime. I have tried to. I have tried to recreate it, to spark it anew in my memory. But it is gone... a hollow, dead thing', I remember why, until *Baldur's Gate 3*, this game was the greatest fantasy RPG ever made. Incredibly smart, epic in scale, and nearly infinite in replayability, *Baldur's Gate II* remains a singular gaming experience that grips you with its narrative, characters and systems before never letting you go. Legendary.

13 KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE II

RELEASED 2025 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 245.5

Quality 8.50 | Importance 7.42 | Freshness 8.00

Andy Edser: I can't remember the last time a game made me grin this hard during its intro sequence. Oh, yes I can. I would have been a teenager, full of youthful vigour, untarnished by the horrors of reality. Speaking of which, *Kingdom Come Deliverance II* brings such a hefty dose of crunchy, faux-medieval realism to its RPG mix, it comes out smelling of onions and turnips. It delivers unforgiving yet easy-enough-to-master combat, dialogue that sounds like real people might have said it, and an open world that feels genuinely reactive and immersive.

12 XCOM 2

RELEASED 2016 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 246

Jody Macgregor: Turn-based tactics don't get better. The complex strategy layer means you're not sure if you've screwed up by diverting to rescue a squaddie instead of chasing alloy for an upgrade, and the missions turn on a dime by introducing new enemies you're not ready for or springing a cluster of aliens on you at the worst time. Beginning in stealth gives you confidence, then you turn a corner and it's brutally ripped away.

Wes Fenlon: *War of the Chosen* is an essential addition, adding some truly hateable villains and narrative stakes to the original game. Nothing since has nailed this combination of strategic tension and Star Trek actors mocking you for missing a 90% shot.

11 DOOM (1993)

RELEASED 1993 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 246.03

Robert Jones: The forever FPS. The FPS you take with you to the desert island. Whether it was the creative brilliance of John Romero, the technical wizardry of John Carmack, or the pioneering spirit of the entire id Software team, back in 1993 gaming history was made, and it continues to be made today thanks to *Doom*'s incredible mod community.

PERSONAL PICK

Andrea Shearon

NORCO

Not that you need to look much further than your daily newsfeed for AI-gone-mad horror stories and reports from a crumbling gig economy, but allow me to recommend the game that tried to warn us all—*Norco*. It's eight hours of point-and-click adventuring through a grungy, southern gothic hellscape that feels a little too familiar to be a dystopian tale of caution.

10 RED DEAD REDEMPTION II

RELEASED 2019 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 246.32

Quality 8.67 | Importance 8.32 | Freshness 6.74

Phil Savage: The most lavish open world in all of PC gaming—*Red Dead Redemption II* is a stunningly beautiful game, both for the majestic scale of its environments, and the intricate detail packed inside of them. There's a good story here—it's the rare Rockstar game that doesn't default to cynicism, satire and cruelty as its central themes, even though you'll find plenty of all three from its cast of characters. But when I look back on my time with it, it's the journeys that I'll always remember, not the destination. The joy of wandering its world, discovering the sights and stories that take place between the missions.

Kara Phillips: It is simply one of the greatest games to ever exist, regardless of whether or not you used to run around your backyard playing cowboys with your friends and family. If you want fast, gunslinging combat, it's there. If you want to just ride around on the back of your horse spotting wildlife, it's there too.

PERSONAL PICK

Morgan Park

SKIN DEEP

Skin Deep landed at 123 in our voting, which should tell you how much we liked it. Blendo Games took seven years to make its ambitious immersive sim about rescuing cats from space pirates, and it was worth the wait. *Skin Deep* has pure systems-driven fun that lets you solve problems in accidentally genius ways. One time I dodged a bullet that broke a window, triggering a decompression that killed everyone on the ship but me.

9 ELDEN RING

RELEASED 2022 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 246.6

Wes Fenlon: Thinking about replaying FromSoftware's massive open world action RPG exhausted me at one point, but thanks to the fantastic Seamless Co-op mod I realized how much of the game is elegantly designed to be skippable. It's a decadent buffet of dungeons and boss fights to feast on, while its expansion *Shadow of the Erdtree* is a Michelin-caliber prix fixe.

8 BALATRO

RELEASED 2024 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 248.1

Robin Valentine: You really have to play *Balatro* to understand what makes it so vital. Those unassuming looks—'what, it's just looking for poker hands?'—disguise an absolute rabbit hole of roguelike strategy and wild, creative build-crafting. It reveals itself to you in exquisite layers—your best run five hours in is nothing compared to your best build 20 hours in.

TOP 100 2025

7 CAVES OF QUD

RELEASED 2024 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 248.2

Quality 8.40 | Importance 7.50 | Freshness 8.67

Lincoln Carpenter: *Caves of Qud* is a tile-based roguelike in the same way that a horse is descended from a sort of shrew: The statement's technically correct, but it doesn't quite capture the mystifying contours and inscrutable affect on display. *Qud* is better understood as a procedural conjuror of deep future fever dreams—of bird-worshipping wasteland villages and their alligator mayors, of marble-skinned warrior-clones entombed in centuries-long subterranean slumber, of chairs that can be people with an application of Spray-a-Brain. Whether I'm bristling with surplus limbs and psionic weaponry on a triumphant run or simply inspecting furniture flavour text, *Qud* is a showcase of stylistic and systemic artistry.

6 STARDEW VALLEY

RELEASED 2016 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 249.08

Elie Gould: A beacon of feel-good cosy goodness, *Stardew Valley* has managed to retain its position as one of the most influential indie games for almost a decade now. Its warm vibes, whimsical characters, and beautiful locations all cobble together to make a farming sim which is at times almost impossible to put down. I've been working on my Cherrytree Farm for about seven years and going about my daily business is just as exciting and fun as ever.

Kara Phillips: It's impossible to not praise the game that inspired every second release to involve some sort of farming mechanics. Yet, despite all the farming simulators I've spent an ungodly amount of time playing, this is still top.

5 CRUSADER KINGS III

RELEASED 2020 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 253.33

Fraser Brown: The best way to experience the medieval world—if the experience you want involves chasing perverts out of your bedroom, murdering family members and alcoholism. *Crusader Kings III* is much more than a strategy game—it's a hugely elaborate RPG, a centuries-long life sim and a platform for so many impressive mods.

TOP 100 2025

4

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

RELEASED 2015 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 259.5

Quality 9.04 | Importance 9.00 | Freshness 7.13

Wes Fenlon: It's somehow been a decade since *The Witcher 3* changed our expectations for RPGs, but it sure doesn't feel like it. How many games since have had sidequests as clever or funny as A Greedy God, in which a couple dummies have been duped into thinking a gluttonous monster is their god? Or a protagonist with as strong a sense of history in their world as Geralt, yet still malleable in the moments you make key choices? Maybe just one, and it's ranked higher on this list. Play it again and discover a new killer quest.

3

DWARF FORTRESS

RELEASED 2006 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 261.43

Quality 9.00 | Importance 8.57 | Freshness 8.00

Lincoln Carpenter: I started playing *Dwarf Fortress* sometime in 2010, and since then I've forgotten more about the dwarven histories I've witnessed than most people will ever learn about our own. I've watched goblin sieges broken by one-armed wrestlers, grief-maddened kings sealed in their throne rooms, failed aqueduct projects leading to food riots, and more. It's a testament to the sprawling intricacy of *Dwarf Fortress*'s fantasy simulation that the 15 years we spent with half-functional marksdwarves—now fixed, thanks to a recent patch—was barely a footnote to the endless toil, tragedy, and turmoil of dwarven existence.

It's an incomparable storytelling engine of absurd complexity, modeling everything from geologic erosion to nerve tissue damage to feline alcohol poisoning. With any luck, I'll still be playing it in 2040.

2 DISCO ELYSIUM

RELEASED 2019 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 267.16

Quality 9.21 | Importance 8.53 | Freshness 8.37

Joshua Wolens: No game has ever captured the malaise of the end of history better. *Disco Elysium*'s Revachol is a city stuck in neutral, ruled over not by a singular tyrant but by the distant dictates of drab men of finance, who spill more blood with a signature than even the most industrious dictator could with a firing squad. Its people are bleary-eyed, ignored, and exploited in a kind of maddeningly abstract way—they know no future but rather an interminable present, a neverending process of things getting inevitably worse.

Until someone goes and blows away a mercenary hired by the Wild Pines corporation, anyway, at which point all the quiet, tinderbox contradictions that define Revachol threaten to catch alight and engulf it. Suddenly the city where every possible future has been tried and foreclosed is forced to lurch into something new, just like the bloated, self-destroying drunk you play as. I'm not sure a more 21st-century game has, or could be made.

Fraser Brown: I am a speed-addicted cop with a drinking problem, my best friend thinks I'm an idiot, I've lost my gun, my car and my badge, I keep trying to eat the rich and I think I can see ghosts. My necktie talks to me. Unrelated: *Disco Elysium* is very good.

I AM A SPEED-ADDICTED COP WITH A DRINKING PROBLEM

Harvey Randall: *Disco Elysium* is a masterfully-written piece of art. It manages to be hilarious, harrowing, uplifting, and depressing all at once. Once moment you're cracking up at Harry DuBois bellowing about an "ice cop-hat fuck show", the next your heart softens as he's treated with understanding by people who've all already lived the worst days of their lives, and are expecting so many more. Also, Kim Kitsuragi is the best companion character in any RPG, bar none. He is an anchor point in the universe, the perfect platonic ideal of that guy. He is, always has been, and will continue to be Him.

A masterfully-written piece of art. Play it.

TOP
100
2025

1

BALDUR'S GATE 3

RELEASED 2023 | **TOP 100 SCORE** 267.64

Quality 9.04 | Importance 8.96 | Freshness 8.54

Robert Jones: The best fantasy RPG of all time. A game of such staggering complexity, flexibility, fun and beauty, that no matter who you are or how you play it, *Baldur's Gate 3* will leave an emotional mark on you. What Larian Studios achieved with *Baldur's Gate 3* is already legendary, with the game scooping up every single award going following its release, as well as topping countless lists just like this. But, let me tell you, its legend is only going to grow further as time passes. *Baldur's Gate 3* is a game that will go on to influence so many more games yet to come, a game whose impact on the video game industry will be as keenly felt as when *Doom* released, or *Deus Ex* or, yes, even its mighty predecessor, *Baldur's Gate II*. I can't wait to see what the future holds.

Harvey Randall: I mean... c'mon, are we really surprised this one's here? The good ship PC Gamer is a flotilla of varying tastes, but the one thing we tend to have in common most of all is that we all love a bloomin' good RPG. *Baldur's Gate 3* is an utter masterclass, hard-earned by Larian's multiple brushes with bankruptcy and years of making increasingly good CRPGs. Swen Vincke and co. wandered out into a field with a bottle, stared at a thundercloud with full confidence, and let the lightning come to them—hitting the D&D renaissance right at its apex.

Compliments need to go to the game's writing, as well. Not since

BALDUR'S GATE 3 WILL LEAVE AN EMOTIONAL MARK ON YOU

Origins have we seen a cast of characters so well-fleshed out, distinct, and realised. Even Wyll (who I think gets dunked on far too often, IMHO) is only a little less golden because he's standing on the pantheon with some all-timers. That the game allows you to miss, kill, or betray any of them shows a ton of confidence in its imsim vision.

I also don't want to let it go unspoken that Larian's post-launch support has turned this game from "just excellent" to an all-timer. New subclasses, difficulty modes, and an honest-to-Bhaal epilogue that turned its slightly-wobbly, hurried-feeling ending into a perfect series of capstones.

Fraser Brown: *Baldur's Gate 3* is one of the few games where I think the 160 hours I spent reviewing it was time well spent. It consumed my every waking moment for weeks and I loved every second of it, giving it the highest score we've ever given a game in the history of PC Gamer (at least in the UK). A landmark review for a landmark game.

Andrea Shearon: Unlike Fraser, I do not have a good excuse for my embarrassingly long *Baldur's Gate 3* playtime. Steam says I've put over 400 hours into Larian's behemoth RPG, but it does not indicate how much of that was time spent rotating my Tav and Karlach around like a rotisserie chicken. Since I got so into modding, I'm gonna say I wracked up at least half of that in the character creator. The other half was time exceedingly well spent petting Scratch and arguing (flirting?) with my brain worm.

Baldur's Gate III will consume your life, and you'll love it.

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10

YEARS

Celebrating a decade of monster slaying in
THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

By Joshua Wolens

Around 20 years ago, CD Projekt founders Marcin Iwiński and Michał Kiciński flew to meet the men they hoped to dethrone – the 'BioWare doctors' Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk. Accompanying them was Adam Badowski, today the joint-CEO of CD Projekt RED, who had the task of wowing the then-undisputed kings of RPG-making with a demo for *The Witcher* that the CDP leadership had tucked under its arm.

"This demo wasn't great," recalls Badowski in 2025, but back then it didn't matter in the slightest. CD Projekt had the bulletproof confidence of youth on its side. "Ray and Greg, they asked the question, 'So, what do you want to achieve?'" Well, wasn't the answer obvious? "We would like to be the biggest, the best RPG team in the industry," Badowski remembers answering. "We would like to create the best RPG game ever."

"So how big is your team?" asked Muzyka and Zeschuk. "Right now it's 15," replied the gaggle of *Witcher* devs, "but we're gonna have about 35 people". The doctors shook their hands and said "We'll call you back."

THE WITCHER 2 MARKED THE DEBUT OF THE STUDIO'S OWN REDENGINE

MAKING HISTORY

A decade later, CD Projekt RED's mad zeal had borne fruit. The studio was a phenomenon, and now people flew to visit it for advice (though the good doctors, ever supportive, did end up helping out the fledgling studio with the first *Witcher*, which ran on BioWare's own Aurora engine).

It was, of course, all thanks to *The Witcher 3*, now the flagship of an enormous global franchise. CDPR had made good on its declaration in BioWare's office: its head now hung heavy beneath the RPG crown.

But if the game was always fated to be a studio-altering success, you sure couldn't tell from the start. The earliest days, when *The Witcher 3* was first scrawled on an office whiteboard, coincided with the apocalyptic collapse of the 2008 financial crisis. "That was a very tricky period for the company," says CDPR's other joint-CEO Michał Nowakowski. "We're like, making sure we have the money to pay people their salaries, and making sure we make good with everybody we owe money to. The early days were quite – for me – focused on, 'How do we escape annihilation?'"

The answer? *The Witcher 2*, which CDPR got out the door in 2011 and then put on Xbox a year later. The game marked the debut of the studio's own REDengine, and was barely comparable to the charming clunk of its predecessor: it was sleek, it was gorgeous, it was cinematic, and it was – in a characteristic fit of ambition for the studio – peanuts compared to the vision CDPR already had in mind for *The Witcher 3*, which would do all of that, but even better, and in an enormous open world this time. Had the studio made an open-world game before? No.

This was still a company flush with youthful confidence, sometimes literally. "This was my first job in game dev," says Kajetan Kapuscinski, who joined CDPR in 2013 as an intern before graduating to become its first official cinematic designer, "and actually, I think I wasn't the only one. This team was constructed from people who were just after [their] first game – like they made one game or maybe two games in the industry, and there were a lot of us who were aiming for the stars."

It's that combination of optimism, determination, and maybe a touch of naivete that eventually put out one of the greatest RPGs of all time. "We didn't know exactly how it's going to be done," recalls Kapuscinski, "and maybe this lack of knowledge was kind of a blessing at this point, because the scale of the game, trying to make an open-world game, created new challenges that we couldn't have imagined beforehand".

Those challenges erupted across every inch of development, from cinematics to narrative to quest design, all the way up to CDPR's discussions with game industry suits about

ROUGH START

Work on *The Witcher 3* started right after the 2008 financial crisis. "How do we escape annihilation?" was CDPR's order of the day.

SMALL FRY

The Witcher deliberately ditched huge bosses after the second game, except for the griffin. That one's a special treat.

CRIT BUILD

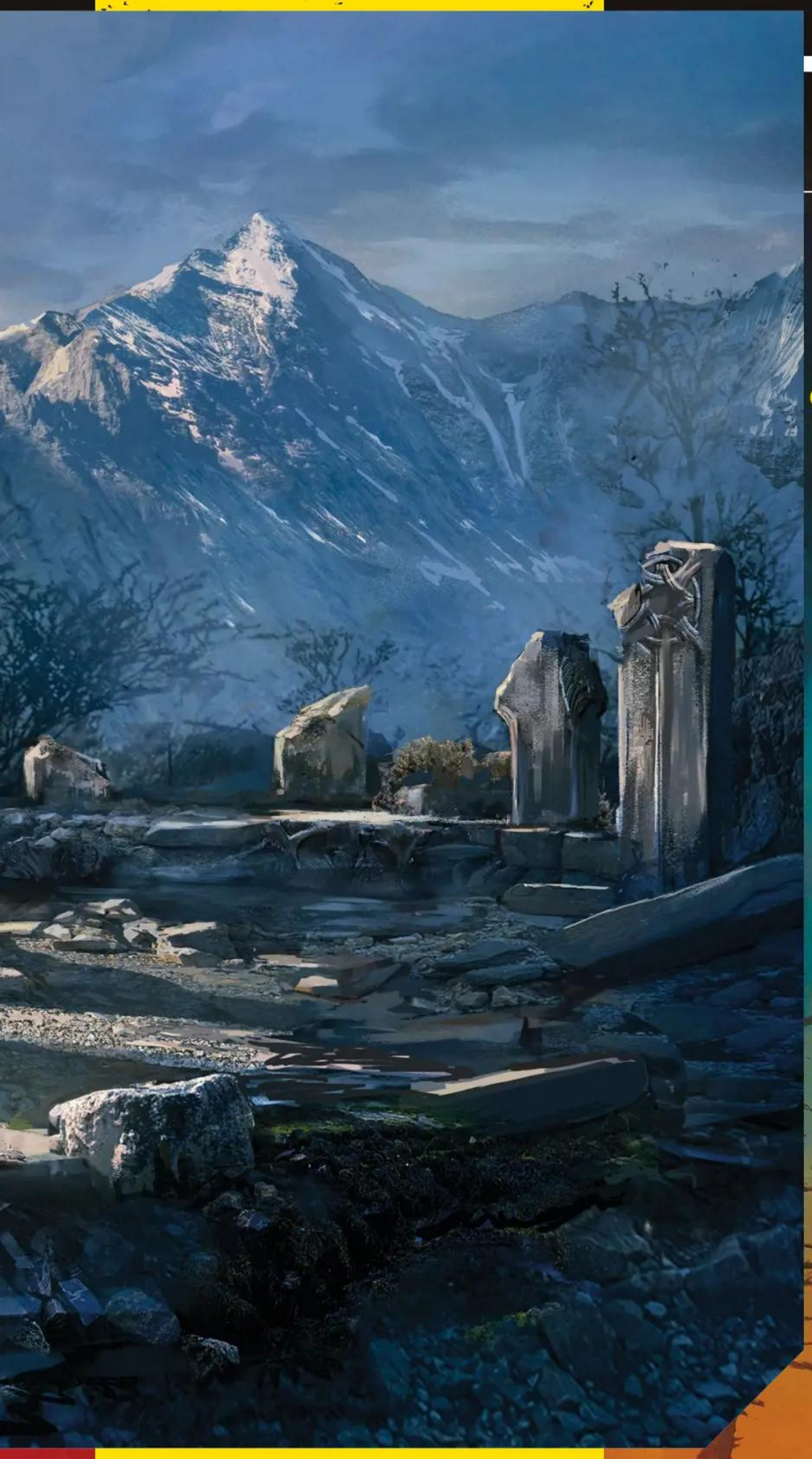
Adam Badowski didn't know *The Witcher 3* would be a massive hit; the studio's goal was just to hit 90+ on Metacritic. "That was our mantra."

HAG ON A SEC

Lead character artist Paweł Mielniczuk's favourite monster? The water hag. "It's Baba Yaga!"

EASTERN PROMISE

"I loved working on monsters," says Mielniczuk. "The more Slavic they could be, [the better]."



marketing and distribution. Badowski himself opened a can of worms at one point by pointing out that, since the game had a whole lot of water in it, someone was going to have get Geralt to swim.

"I asked a very difficult question, 'There's water, where's swimming?' The whole room was quiet. People, they thought that we needed to cut something so we don't need to have swimming. If there's water, there's swimming, if there's swimming, there's diving, if there's diving, you have to build new locations."

Quite an ordeal, given CDPR already had to conjure new teams and departments to deal with the demands of filling *The Witcher 3*'s already-existing and moisture-free world with stuff to do, a process that was endless.

"When we sort of felt like we finished, we played the game," says *Witcher 3* quest designer Błażej Augustynek, "and I remember, I think it was someone from the board saying, 'Yeah, this plays great, but the world is empty. There's nothing but quests.'" While CDPR could make its previous games feel full to bursting with nothing but side-quests, trying the same thing with *The Witcher 3* left the map feeling barren. "It turns out that, in an open world, you have to have other stuff." So CDPR threw together a "little strike team" of devs to fill its world with (Augustynek grimaces at using the 'C' word) "meaningful content" much of which took the form of the question marks scattered across the world map.

It was smoother sailing when it came to the game's narrative; CDPR's area of expertise and – per Badowski – its number one priority. "It was pretty easy when it comes to story development," says lead writer, Marcin Blacha, "to those assumptions that it's about fatherhood, it's about looking for Ciri".

"The biggest changes were probably regarding the Wild Hunt," says Blacha. "All the time we had this fear that maybe the game is not big enough," which meant that, "initially the game was much bigger". When the studio realised the game was plenty big enough, Blacha and co realised, "We needed to get rid of some content, and usually it was content regarding the Wild Hunt." Which is why we never got a quest that would have seen Geralt go undercover as a rider of the Hunt – it got left on the cutting room floor.

But mostly, translating CDPR's hallmarks to an open world was a process of ambition running headfirst into an obstacle, and remarkably talented people having to invent themselves around it. "I remember this conversation with one of the programmers," sums up Kapuscinski, recalling his efforts to zhuzh up the game's conversations and cutscenes. "I was asking, 'OK, could I make Geralt, you know, move two steps to the right?' and he was like, 'No, it's not possible'. That's where we started... issue after issue, topic after topic, we were discovering how to make it possible."

TRANSLATING CDPR'S HALLMARKS TO AN OPEN WORLD WAS A PROCESS OF AMBITION

The problems kept coming. How do you set up monster hunt contracts when players might just happen across their quarry and slaughter it without even accepting the quest? How do you tell the story of a dungeon when they might accidentally stumble in through its secret exit and read all your carefully placed notes backwards? Two, three, or four quests might all influence one another in subtle ways, but devs had no guarantee of the order people would encounter them in.

Harsh reality never stopped rearing its ugly head, and it was often young devs freestyling ways around it, whether that's Kapuscinski as the studio's first cinematic designer or Miles Tost (now CDPR's level design lead), who came on board as "the second level designer to ever join the company. I spent my first days at CDPR planning Skellige, from the background mood to where individual villages and all that were placed. Surprisingly, much of that actually made it into the final game."

It was in all quarters a development process heavy on invention and improvisation, even down to the casting of Charles Dance as Nilfgaardian emperor Emhyr var

Emreis. "There was a point during the development and promotion process when we put a countdown up on our website," says Borys Pugacz-Muraszkiewicz, English adaptation director. "I don't remember, actually, the nature of the announcement we were going to make, but we had the countdown on the website and then we decided not to make the announcement."

This was, all told, a little awkward, because now CDPR had a live countdown to an announcement, but no actual announcement. So someone, "came up with the idea that we should just enlist a top actor and, when the clock runs down, announce them as the big reveal". The studio pulled on a biz-dev team member's contacts in the "talent management world" to quickly recruit Charles Dance and his clout-heavy name and, hey presto, *The Witcher 3*'s devs – sweat beading on their foreheads – had an announcement to make.

So maybe you can't fault execs too harshly for regarding the game's free-jazz approach to development a little sceptically before launch. While the devs were in the open-world trenches, CDPR's business team was on a whirlwind tour of chats with distributors, retailers, even manufacturing plants, trying to summon excitement and ink deals for the game ahead of release.

One trip in particular was emblematic of the response the studio got in most of those talks. "We were in Bentonville, Arkansas – the HQ of Walmart," remembers Nowakowski, "and [a Walmart exec] said, 'I like you guys, but it's just not gonna happen. You guys are not Bethesda. You don't have a history of games like that'."

Nowakowski made him a bet: "If we sell well, I'm gonna fly over to Arkansas, and [you're] gonna buy me dinner." He's still waiting on dinner.

THE LAUNCH

"I felt like a rock star," says *Witcher 3* quest designer Joanna Radomska, about the immediate aftermath of the game's release in May 2015. "Like, my grandma was calling me: 'They talked about your game – you! – in the news, on the TV, or in the newspaper'."

CDPR had done it. Through all the unexpected challenges, mad scrambles, and unmasked scepticism, the studio had produced a masterpiece: an open world that managed to put narrative first and deliver on it too.

"MY GRANDMA WAS CALLING ME: 'THEY TALKED ABOUT YOUR GAME ON THE TV!'"

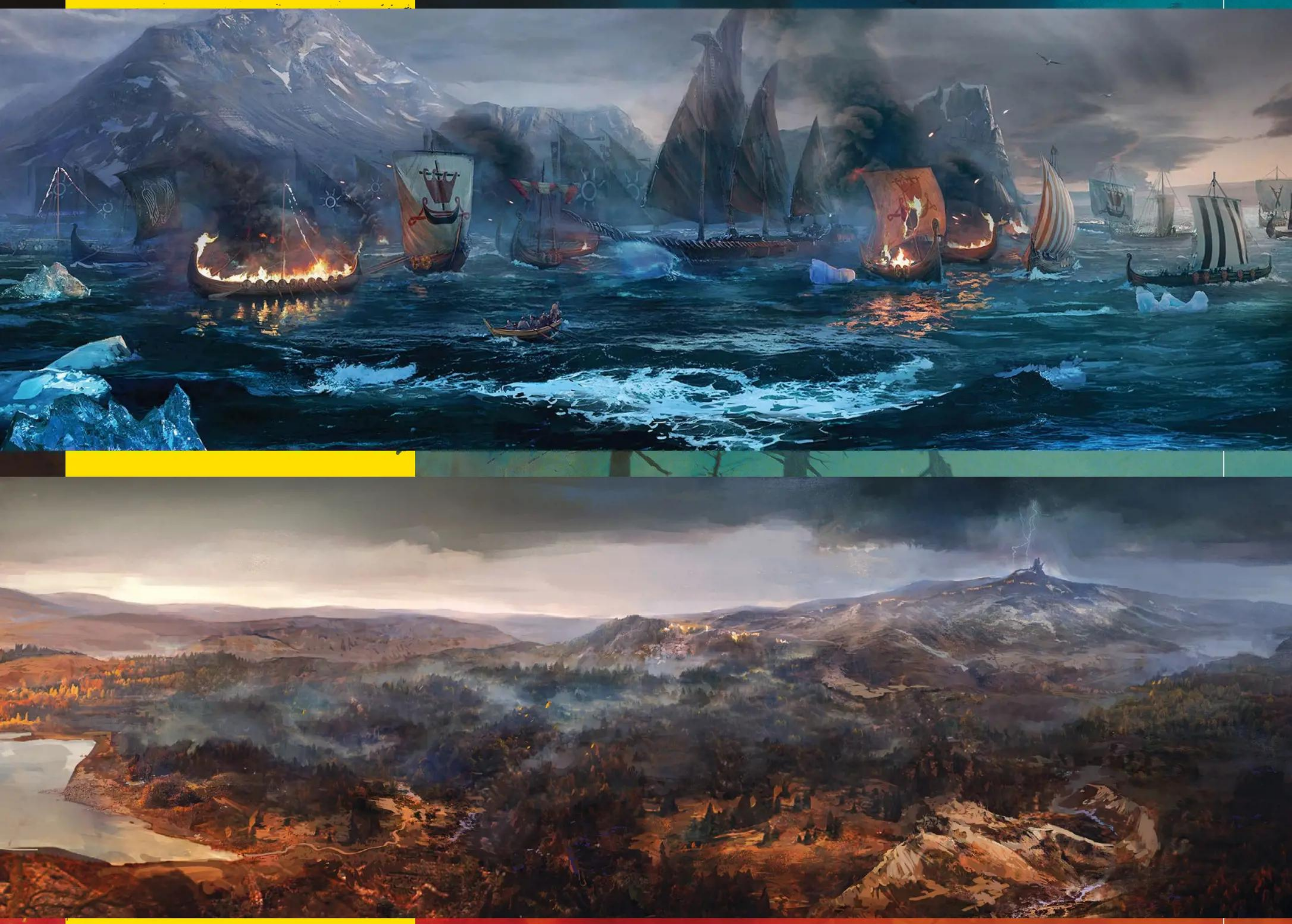
FLASH DANCE
Casting Charles Dance as Emperor Emhyr was a Hail Mary by the studio, which needed an announcement for the end of a web countdown.

EXPANSIONS

Blood, wine, an unorthodox gardener

HEARTS OF STONE
Releasing just a few months after the main game came out, *Hearts of Stone* pits Geralt against a foe who is pretty much Lucifer. *The Witcher 3*'s lead writer Marcin Blacha reckons the DLC is "a little bit underrated" and I agree, if only because its boss fight against a faceless 'Caretaker' – who lead character artist Paweł Mielniczuks calls "straight out of *Bloodborne*" – is the best in the game.

BLOOD AND WINE
The Witcher 3's second, meatier DLC came out a year after the main game, and sends Geralt off to fantasy-France to trifle with vampires and buy a vineyard (he's earned it). The idea for it was pitched to big boss Adam Badowski by Blazej Augustynek, who initially thought it would get sent "straight to the trash". Little did he know Wine Club Geralt was exactly what we all wanted.



"We had super-ambitious goals that we were gonna sell like, maybe six million units, which we ended up achieving in, I think, about a quarter," says Nowakowski.

Two years after release, it was still outgrossing some of the biggest launches on Steam. Three years on, *The Witcher* series as a whole hit 50 million games sold. Three years after that, *The Witcher 3* hit 50 million copies sold by itself. Even the release of *Arkham Knight* a month after *The Witcher*, once an event that Nowakowski feared would "roll over us", couldn't dent its momentum.

The response was ludicrous, enduring, historic, and unexpected. "I remember talking to people one week before launch," says Tost, "they had significant doubts whether this would end up being received as a good game or not."

Some devs were, says Tost, "So deep in the trenches, looking at all the issues you are still working on, the imperfections that you specifically were aware of in your work," that they struggled to appraise the game's quality holistically. Critics soon dispelled that.

The day reviews went live, CDPR's office was full as the studio waited anxiously to see how the world had taken to its baby. "The tension in the air that day was tangible," says Tost. "People were technically supposed to work on whatever patch we were working on, but we could hear just the spamming of F5 keys when the time was near."

"The first one I saw was Gamespot," says Nowakowski, "that

gave us 10 out of 10, and I remember Adam and I, we just hugged". There was maybe a touch of vindication, too, after all those talks with execs who didn't think the studio could pull it off, "People who didn't believe in the game – they were overwhelmed with the great reviews," remembers Badowski. "There were high fives all the time, always screaming, shouting, 'Another 10! Another 9! Another 10!'"

It was a scene repeated all throughout CD Projekt. "The second it dropped, you could hear it in the corridors. Like, really, it was like echoes, like, 'Yeaaaah! 10!'" says Michał Platkow-Gilewski, CDPR's VP of PR and communication.

Morale was high, the Metacritic score was surging, and devs were already beavering away at the game's two upcoming expansions, but it wasn't all sunny weather. Beneath the din of *The Witcher 3*'s overwhelmingly positive reception, a small segment of players were stewing over what they perceived as a 'downgrade' in the game's graphics between its glitzy E3

DEVS WERE ALREADY BEAVERING AWAY AT THE GAME'S TWO EXPANSIONS

MS SAYS YES

Lots of partners doubted CDPR, but Nowakowski says Microsoft was the "first party that actually believed in us big time".

demos and the final release. The subreddits burbled, as subreddits do, with posts titled things like, "*The Witcher 3* got a massive downgrade," and "*Witcher 3*: Graphical Downgrade Analysis."

"That was horrible," says Platkow-Gilewski. "There was this euphoria of, like, 'Yeah! It's great! It's amazing!' and at this same moment [there were] voices saying, 'OK, but the version which we saw in 2013 was different than what we have in the game right now."

This was the game's world rearing its head to throw down one last gauntlet, "Throughout the development process, everything changes," says Platkow-Gilewski. "You first show the game in that state, then you introduce, I think it was a different renderer, different lighting. You need to make it as global in-game as possible to avoid custom solutions, because it's just too big. The game is too big to work on every scene. At that point, we didn't know how big the issue was." Platkow-Gilewski sat down with Badowski and CDP founder Marcin Iwiński to figure out a response. "We had a frank discussion about, like, 'What are we facing here?'" The answer was patches, tweaks and red meat for the crowd of PC gamers with rigs that could compute God: new settings to take full advantage of their beefy machines, and soon the "storm wore off... but for a while, we were scared".

But really, nothing short of the end of the world could have crushed CDPR's high. Enthusiasm reached such a peak that it actually crashed the studio's intranet that linked its Warsaw and Krakow offices. "One day we come into work," says Tomasz Marchewka, who wrote for *The Witcher 3*'s *Blood and Wine* expansion, "And whenever you tried to connect to the editor to write a dialogue, you push a button

and you wait 50 seconds for the letter to appear on the screen". This was, for a team that still had two full-game-sized pieces of DLC to produce, a suboptimal set of working conditions.

A few frantic calls to IT later and it turned out that – far from being a cyberattack or some kind of catastrophic system failure – the studio's bandwidth had just been jammed by people checking and sharing reviews. "There's nothing left for the letters to flow over the wire from Krakow to Warsaw. People couldn't believe it went so well."

THE POST-GAME

CDPR had already transformed since the days when it consisted in large part of a crew of niche RPG devs announcing their intention to take over the world in BioWare's office. It had become bigger, more varied, more international. *The Witcher* 3's development was the first time, in Radomska's recollection, that the company couldn't just write its internal docs in Polish, "I think at the beginning of *The Witcher 3*, we even wrote things in Polish. But then we got a quest designer from outside Poland, and he was like, 'I have no idea what the quests are about, come on guys!'"

Those shifts were gradual things compared to the growth that *The Witcher 3*'s success brought. The studio, "Changed massively" says Badowski, "because we were growing fast from *The Witcher 1* through *Witcher 2* and *The Witcher: Wild Hunt*, but after *The Witcher: Wild Hunt*, the team became huge."

Nowakowski concurs: "Hiring suddenly became easier, we were able to attach talent we were not able to before for financial reasons, because we suddenly were able to pay more and better, but also for the reasons that [people said], 'OK, I wanna be attached to your next project... a lot of people were really touched with this story, and with the way we told it, and they said, 'OK, I'm really up for being part of that.'"

And so, CDPR grew. And grew. And grew. To studio veterans, the post-*Witcher* 3 CDPR is a completely different beast compared to the pokey office they walked into 15 or 20 years ago. "I joined the company [in 2006]," says *Witcher* 3 lead character artist Paweł Mielniczuk, "there were like 60 people here," and they occupied a mere two rooms in the wider CD Projekt offices. They were also, prior to *The Witcher 1*'s release, not held in the highest esteem, "We were just this ugly child of the company that nobody wanted until *The Witcher 1*'s release... some guys living in a cellar making games."

But all of that underwent "a complete transformation" over Mielniczuk's career at CDPR. *The Witcher* series made more money than some countries, of course, but also, those two rooms full of devs doing god-knows-what turned into a company so big and spread out that "whatever you do, there's no way you can know everybody".

CDPR expanded off the back of *The Witcher 3*'s success, but it didn't change its form. It was still the freewheeling, ad-libbing, relatively unorganised creature that had made *The Witcher 3*, with what Badowski calls a "very flat structure" and "simple pipelines". Nowakowski is more direct, "Things were chaotic in the way we were developing. We had this very 'waterfall' approach to development, and were very siloed. A lot of things were developed in almost isolation, as weird as it may sound, so we sometimes didn't see the actual effects of how it actually interacts until it was put together."

BANDWIDTH HAD BEEN JAMMED BY PEOPLE CHECKING REVIEWS

The studio's development process was not, Nowakowski stresses, a "burning cart on fire", but CDPR's methods were increasingly ill-suited to its grandiose ambitions. "I think at *The Witcher 3*, we could already hear the boat creaking a little bit, and I think we had a lot of luck and a lot of talent, a lot of talent with luck in their hands... that made it happen at the last moment."

At the same time, some at the company struggled to adjust to its rapid ascension from scrappy underdog to industry leading light whose name could open any door, that

I'M GAME

The success of Game of Thrones gave CDPR confidence that people would take to *The Witcher 3*'s dark fantasy vibes.

RIGHT: Devs constantly went back to Sapkowski's Witcher books for inspiration and guidance (and still do).

BELOW: The lead character artist loved giving charming personalities to ugly monsters.

MODERN WARFARE

Nilfgaard's look was meant to make it seem like "the futuristic army of medieval times".

got a day-long visit from PlayStation's Mark Cerny because Sony wanted to know how its future consoles could make CDPR's job easier. "It started to be challenging because of the expectations," says Badowksi, "What's next?"

If you can see the iceberg marked '*Cyberpunk 2077*'s launch' on the horizon, you're not alone, but CDPR's leadership didn't take the breath it needed to realise there was a problem at the time. In fact, it didn't take that breath until after *Cyberpunk* launched, when the studio responded to the chaos by overhauling its structure. "We were marching," says Badowski, "and we wanted to jump from one game to another, from *The Witcher* to expansions, from expansions to the next game".

But in 2015, *Cyberpunk* was years away, and CDPR still had a victory lap to run. These were two expansions – *Hearts of Stone* and *Blood and Wine* – that served as such a perfect capstone to the game as a whole it almost felt like the devs were showing off. *Hearts of Stone* came first, a horror-tinged tale that sees Geralt face off against, well, pretty much Satan. "*Hearts of Stone*, in my opinion, is maybe a little bit underrated," says Marcin Blacha. "It's a very popular expansion, it's really appreciated, but for me it was quite an achievement, because we did it in like, I don't know, half a year."

In fact, production went so smoothly that it made its makers suspicious. "Pretty early, we knew what to do, then we just did it in the first iteration. Then everybody looked at everyone, 'OK, it goes so well, something terrible is going to happen.' But nothing happened, and then we shipped it and everybody was like, 'What an great expansion!'"

Blood and Wine, the big brother of the two expansions and the one that added on a whole new map to the game's already wide and rambling open world, was a little more complex. Before *The Witcher 3* was even out, Augustynek remembers that the studio bosses were looking for an expansion pitch that was "different visually, very visually different" from

IT WAS PRETTY CLEAR WE WANT HER AS THE NEXT MAIN PERSON, MAIN CHARACTER

the main game but that "still feels like it belongs in Sapkowski". Augustynek did what all *Witcher* devs do in times of creative need, he cracked open the original books. "I stumbled on [*Blood and Wine*'s setting] Beauclair and Toussaint and the whole thing of Regis being there – you know, one of my favourite characters from the books."

The issue was, of course, that someone had melted Regis into a pool of bloody chunks in Sapkowski's original stories, but Augustynek decided to revive him for his pitch anyway. "It is a little bit of fan service, but it's for me, Adam's not gonna accept it anyway."

And then Adam accepted it, and Augustynek and co got to work on what would become Geralt's retirement story, bidding farewell to the character that had transformed CDPR irreversibly. Though, with this all kicking off in 2013, that transformation hadn't quite reached full flower yet. "It was pretty early on we realised that this is where it ends, and also pretty early on, we knew that we wanted to work with Ciri later on... even like in 2014 it was already an idea floating around the studio that she's next."

Because, of course, Ciri is the true protagonist of *The Witcher* anyway. "In *Witcher* 3, Geralt is just helping out... he is there for her. So it was pretty clear we want her as the next main person, main character."

So, on *The Witcher 3*'s tenth birthday, Geralt remains happily ensconced in his Toussaint manor, seemingly only returning to provide his gravelly tones to the odd trailer. But CDPR is staring at a fourth, Ciri-led game down the barrel – its first massive RPG since its post-*Cyberpunk* overhaul and its first *Witcher* game since the studio became a household name. You've got to wonder how it's feeling about everything – past, present, and future.

"It's a very well-established franchise," says Blacha, who has once again taken up a lead writer mantle on the next game. "People love it, we know how to handle it. I'm pretty confident about *The Witcher 4*. I mean, we didn't create Geralt and we didn't create this world. We made it popular through the games. But the thing is I don't think frequently about the past. It happened in the past. It shaped me in a way that I became confident about it... and it doesn't make me anxious anymore. It just goes on. And it's a nice feeling because, you know, I know that I created something big, and probably I will be remembered because of it." ■

BFFL
If Dandelion ever left Geralt it'd be like "losing a part of the character" says lead writer Marcin Blacha.

FANCY A ROUND OF GWENT?

What's CDPR's favourite Gwent faction?

NILFGAARD
Far and away the most popular Gwent faction, and also the personal favourite of big boss Adam Badowski.

MONSTERS
A surprise runner-up, the monster deck is heavy on summons and is the go-to choice for lead writer Marcin Blacha.

NORTHERN REALMS
The correct choice, and also the choice of joint-CEO Michał Nowakowski. Patriots one and all.

PC GAMER

THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION

As the legendary 4X releases its seventh mainline instalment, PCG looks back at the games that made history

By Ian Evenden

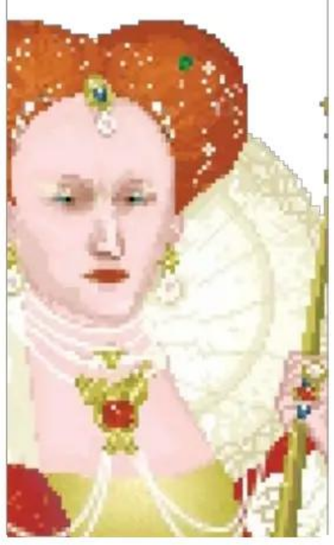
RELEASED 1991 DEVELOPER MicroProse

Sid Meier's Civilization

The dawning of a new age

1 The original. Developed for PCs running MS-DOS, but ported to other platforms such as the Amiga, SNES and PlayStation, *Civilization* came after *SimCity*, *Railroad Tycoon* and *Populous* but produced something arguably deeper and with longer-lasting influence. Designer Sid Meier was a co-founder of Microprose, and had been working on 2D action platformers and flight sims such as 1985's *F-15 Strike Eagle*, but felt that videogames didn't have to be wholly about destroying things.

So we got something that cast the player as a great historical leader, from a choice of 15 (largely a cosmetic choice in this game), starting in 4000BC and building toward win conditions including launching a voyage to Alpha Centauri (an idea that birthed spin-off *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri*), scoring the most points before the year 2100, or destroying every other civilisation on the map.

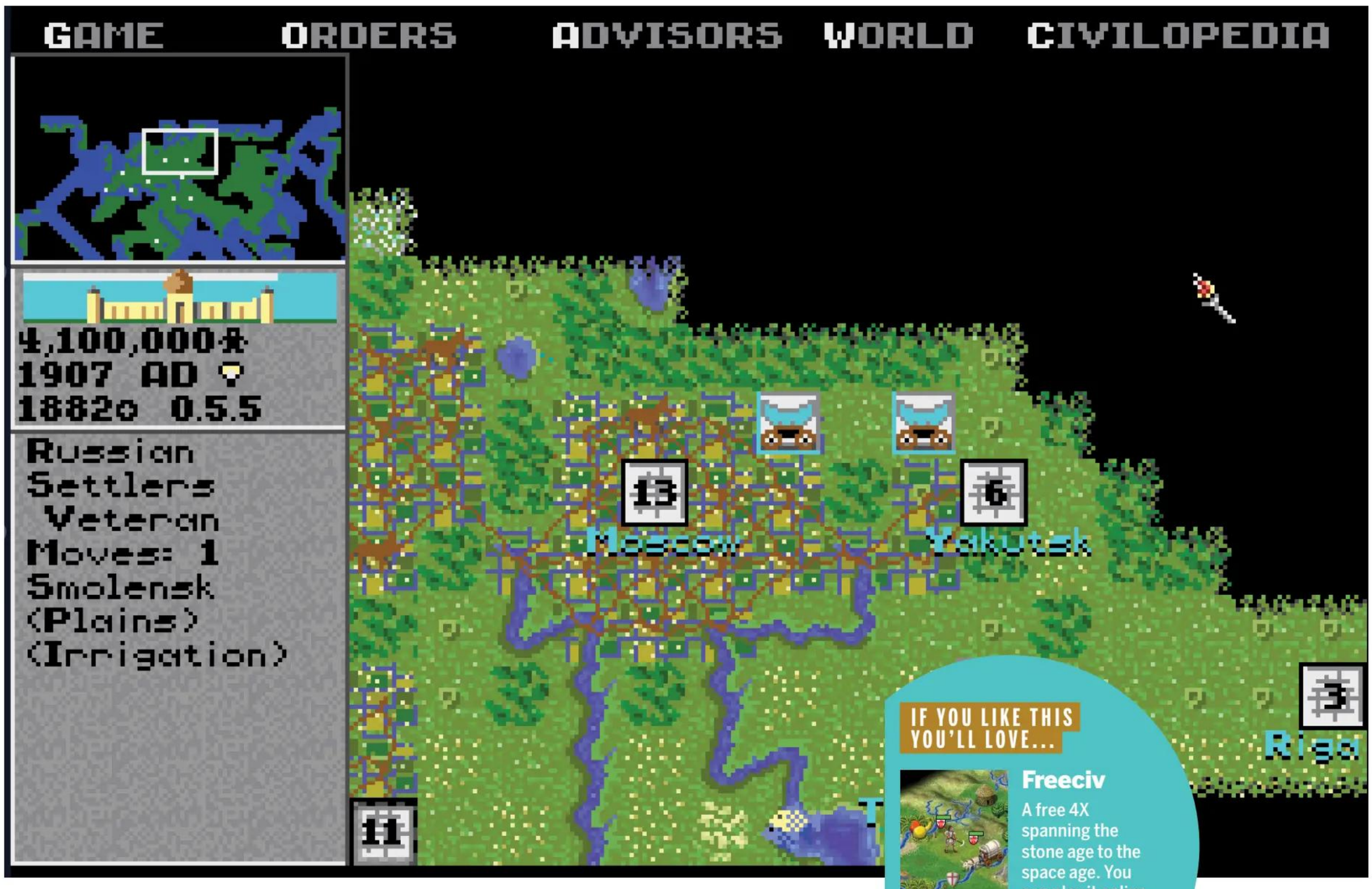


Though crude by today's standards, these multiple victory conditions have become a hallmark of the series and the entire 4X genre, along with its turn-based nature, grid-delineated map, and micromanagement of cities and units to find the best path to success.

Civilization can also claim to have introduced the concept of the tech tree to games – and this is the primary way in which your civilisation can grow. Winning an arms race to get a new technology on the battlefield is a fast way to conquer more territory, but you can still defend using existing units dug into your cities – a bronze age phalanx fighting off a battleship may look comical, but it's effective.

PC Gamer didn't exist in 1991, but *Civilization* went down well in reviews from other publications, and has topped lists of the greatest and most influential games ever since, including a 1994 PCG US list of the top 40 PC games that placed it in second place after *Doom* and ahead of *Railroad Tycoon*, *Populous* and *SimCity 2000*.

The popular story about peace-loving Gandhi launching nukes after an integer overflow bug set his aggression level to 10 is an urban myth, but has been added to subsequent games in the series, starting with *Civ V*, as an Easter egg.



IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU'LL LOVE...

Freeciv

A free 4X spanning the stone age to the space age. You can play it online at freecivweb.org

RELEASED 1996 DEVELOPER MicroProse

Sid Meier's Civilization II

Evolution, not revolution

2 Despite keeping the originator's name in its title, *Civ II* was designed by multiple people, including Brian Reynolds who would go on to co-found Firaxis (with Meier and Jeff Briggs, *Civ I* writer and composer) and Big Huge Games.

The new game switched to an isometric presentation from the old top-down view, and expanded on the original rather than attempting to reinvent it. So while you now have 23 nations, diplomatic reputations and a rebalancing to take the focus off military victory, plus mod support and a map editor in the PC version, the target of getting to our nearest neighbouring star remained.

RELEASED 2001 DEVELOPER Firaxis

Sid Meier's Civilization III

A cultural victory

3 Firaxis Games took us back to 4000BC again for the third mainline *Civ* title, and while the number of playable leaders dropped to 16 (and the timeline got 50 years lopped off, ending in 2050), they received new ways to govern – with a rather worrying variant of fascism introduced in the *Conquests* expansion pack that made workers 200% efficient, presumably out of fear – and unique units such as America's F-15s and India's war elephants. The biggest addition, however, was probably the concept of culture, which defines how much a city influences its surroundings, projecting this soft power across borders and causing enemy cities to join you if your rating is high.

RELEASED 2005 DEVELOPER Firaxis

Sid Meier's Civilization IV

Big changes across the map

4 Under lead designer Soren Johnson (*Old World*, *Offworld Trading Company*, *Spore*), *Civilization* got a thorough overhaul that included a new 3D graphics engine and a voiceover from Leonard Nimoy.

Of course, there was a bit more than that, but *Civ IV*'s new look, its animations, and the way the new engine made zooming in and out smoother and easier, hid some complete reworkings of *Civ*'s mechanics. Units had their attack and defence stats merged, but new specialisms meant there was a lot more to placing soldiers than just using the ones with bigger numbers. Cities lost their pollution scores, but gained a City Health rating that could be coaxed upward by adding improvements and sending in food resources or even just fresh water. Systems of governance can be customised with civic options, so you can introduce free market reforms to your iron-handed communism, but you'll have to research them first.

And the list of additions goes on. Religion is a newly expanded idea here, making your citizens happier if you build the right kind of temple, giving you diplomatic bonuses, and if you're lucky enough to found a religion and control its holy city, you get further divine bounty, though there is no religion-specific victory condition. Units can now gain experience and receive promotions, and some civs get a choice of leaders, each with differing traits, while 'great people' such as scientists, artists and merchants circulate within your population, potentially starting golden ages.

The tech tree, the solid trunk around which the games have always grown, loses its defined eras in this release, so you can potentially gain advancements really early if you work hard enough. The map editor remains, but the game now also includes extra multiplayer modes that have led to the game retaining its popularity.

HUGE MODERNISATION

Civ IV is a huge modernisation of a successful formula, and it was received as such. Following a 94% review in PC Gamer (also winning the Best Turn-Based Strategy award in 2005's PCG US awards issue, and gaining nominations in Best Multiplayer Game and Best Game), it received top marks across the board. Time magazine put it at number 11 in its 2016 Best Video Games of All Time list, and it became the first videogame to win a Grammy, the 2009 Best Instrumental Arrangement Accompanying Vocalist(s) award for its song Baba Yetu, composed for the game but also appearing on composer Christopher Tin's Calling All Dawns album.

IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU'LL LOVE...

FreeCol

Yep, it's a free game based on *Colonization*. It runs in Java, but still gets updates. freecol.org

RELEASED 2010 DEVELOPER Firaxis

Sid Meier's Civilization V

The joy of hex

5

Having hexagonal tiles instead of square ones is a clue that things have changed once again behind the scenes in *Civ V*, and this release sees another new engine for the series. There's a new designer too, John Shafer, who had worked on *Civ IV* expansions and would go on to work for Stardock and Paradox, releasing *At The Gates* in 2019 from his own studio, Conifer Games.

The fifth game in the series also brings city-states to the game, competing with you for resources while making no attempt to win. There are also research agreements between leaders, and a change to combat thanks to the removal of unit-stacking – the so-called stack of doom that could see whole armies placed on the same tile. This was potentially lethal for your opponents, but you had to be sure they didn't have artillery that could chip away at all of them at once.

RELEASED 2016 DEVELOPER Firaxis

Sid Meier's Civilization VI

War and peace

6

With designer Ed Beach now at the helm, who stays on for *Civilization VII*, and Sean Bean on voiceover duty (who doesn't), *Civ VI* keeps the hexes from the previous game but does its best to hide them under some seamless scenery. The game also gets the religious victory condition missing from previous entries, handing you the win if you can convert 50% of every other civilisation's cities to your way of seeing things. You just have to watch out for holy wars started by rival faiths.

The game also co-opts the Great Works system from *Civ V*'s *Brave New World* expansion.

YOU JUST HAVE TO WATCH OUT FOR HOLY WARS STARTED BY RIVAL FAITHS

IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU'LL LOVE...

OpenTTD

An open-source city sim based on *Transport Tycoon Deluxe*. It's on version 14, and work is ongoing.

DEVELOPER Q&A

LINDSAY RIEHL

Firaxis' chief of staff on Civ's development

Lindsay Riehl was director of production on *Civs VI* and *VII*, and has also worked at Zynga and Kalypso Media. We spoke to her about her experiences with *Civilization* through the ages.

How did you come to work on the *Civilization* series?

I joined MicroProse in 1987 to work on a newly formed sports label. MicroProse's bread and butter at the time were flight and military simulations and they were interested in diversifying their portfolio and exploring other genres of games. After great success with *F-15 Strike Eagle* and *F-19 Stealth Fighter*, Sid [Meier] began focusing on strategy games and topics that he was passionate about and had always interested him – *Pirates!* and *Railroad Tycoon* were born!

Fortunately for me, I was moved to the adventure/strategy label because our sports games were not as successful! Next up for the strategy label was *Sid Meier's Civilization*, and I was part of the team to market and launch the original game.

I stayed at MicroProse after they were purchased by Spectrum Holobyte as the marketing manager on *Sid Meier's Civilization II*. At the time *Civ II* was set to launch, Spectrum Holobyte was solely focused on their Top Gun licence and did not put a lot of support behind *Civilization II*. The game launched and the *Civ* fan base and community propelled the game to the top of the sales charts. During this time I formed strong working relationships with Brian Reynolds [lead designer], Jeff Briggs [composer and producer] and Sid Meier, the founders of Firaxis.

What does a chief of staff do?

My day to day job is to be the producer of our executive leadership team and ensure we prioritise, align and drive forward strategic initiatives to meet our studio goals. There is a lot of change in the industry and while Firaxis has been around for almost 29 years, we too have to evolve with changing consumer demands and industry trends. I also do some special projects, help where needed and general cat herding! There is never a dull moment.

What jobs did you do at Firaxis before becoming chief of staff?

I was originally brought on as the director of marketing shortly after Firaxis was founded in 1996. When Firaxis was formed, we were an independent studio with a multi-publisher business model. At this time, it was considered unusual for a developer to have a dedicated marketing person on staff, and I got to pitch our titles to publishers, and champion the vision and passion for our games and studio. I left Firaxis when it was purchased by Take-Two, and worked in design production for Zynga's Facebook titles, *Cityville 2* and *FrontierVille*. I also helped set up a US publishing arm for Kalypso Media, a German-based company, to promote and publish *Tropico 3* in the US.

I happily reunited with Firaxis in 2013 as Director of Marketing. I was asked to build Firaxis' profile as a dual-franchise studio and look for opportunities for Firaxis to connect directly with our fans. I'm very proud that my team established a livestream studio that has grown into a state-of-the-art facility and created the first ever Firaxicon for our fans – I'm still hoping to bring that back one day!

In 2018, I took the director of production role and worked with the teams to develop *Civilization VI*, *Civilization VII* and *Marvel's Midnight Suns*. Heather Hazen, studio head and president of Firaxis, saw a need for a chief of staff role at our studio as we continue to grow and evolve to meet the needs of our players and our industry. I believe my experience

DEV PROFILE

Lindsay Riehl

Chief of staff, Firaxis

Lindsay Riehl has credits on games from *Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender* (1992) up to *Midnight Suns* and *Civilization VII*.

BELOW LEFT: F-19 *Stealth Fighter* was the best game about a plane that doesn't exist (or does it?).

BELOW: *Civ I* may look crude by today's standards, but still plays well.

"I CAN'T IMAGINE FIRAXIS WITHOUT SID IN THE BUILDING"

wearing multiple hats and being closely connected to the origin and heritage of Firaxis and our franchises helped me transition to the role.

Did you ever think that the *Civilization* series would still be going more than 30 years later?
Given our incredible fan base, I'm not surprised. Sid and *Civilization* have touched and had a positive impact on so many people's lives! But it wasn't a given that the game would continue for 30 years. When Firaxis was formed, they did not own the rights to *Civilization* and instead started work on *Alpha Centauri* and *Gettysburg*.

In 2000 Firaxis inked a deal with Hasbro/Infogrames, who purchased the rights from Spectrum Holobyte, and we began *Civilization III*.

Firaxis was later acquired by Take-Two, which then acquired the licence from Infogrames. In 2004, Sid, Firaxis and *Civilization* were happily reunited again!

What has been your favourite addition to the game?
I think *Civ VI*'s *Gathering Storm* expansion added an innovative and fun twist to playing *Civ*. It presented a spontaneous random event system that created unique challenges your civ needed to solve for. Also, you could use technologies to help mitigate floods and other disasters. It added a real-world element to *Civ* that I always thought was cool. I'm also super excited about *Civilization VII*'s multiplayer. More players will be able to play with each other through cross-platform cross-play, connecting our audiences together like never before.

How has the team changed in the course of making seven games (and all the spinoffs)?
A lot has changed for our teams. Supporting multiple platforms and technologies has changed the way we develop the game. *Civilization* is a global phenomenon, so a growing area for us is bringing in regional experts and subject matter experts to provide authentic representation and fun, historical context for different and diverse cultures, leaders and civs to our players. You can see that in our partnership with the Shawnee in *Civilization VII*.

It's always been important to the teams to integrate player feedback into our designs. That loop moves so much more quickly now and we have evolved to bring on teams and expertise to support that ongoing conversation with the community and ensure we are always delivering high-quality content.

Do you have a favourite *Civilization* release, and do you still play it?
I'm more of a casual gamer and [console spin-off] *Civilization Revolution* is the *Civ* I spent the most time with. The irony is that I wasn't working at Firaxis when it was made; I played while I was working for Kalypso because we were researching what we considered the industry standard for strategy on Xbox 360, prepping for the launch of *Tropico 3*.

ABOVE: Catapult vs tank: a classic *Civ* stand-off.

Is there a memory from playing the game that sticks with you?
I was playing *Civ Rev* and my son, who played *Madden* and *Call of Duty* pretty much exclusively at the time, picked it up. The next thing I knew it was past midnight and he had to be up for school the next day. It's another story of just 'one more turn'.

Is there a leader in the game who you want to see dominate the map?
Catherine the Great! Always!

Do you still see Sid Meier around the office?
Sid is a constant at Firaxis – he is in the office just about every day working on new prototypes. He also works with the teams to rapidly prototype ideas and new systems that they want to try out in game. I can't imagine Firaxis without Sid in the building! ■

Cyberpunk 2077

ALONG FOR THE RIDE

By Matt Killeen

Does a lack of choice make **CYBERPUNK 2077** a bad RPG?

The rendezvous is a motel room. The heist has gone badly and, as the sole survivor, I'm limping in with the goods. The fixer is frightened. Long before Dexter DeShawn is having me gunned down coming out of the bathroom, I knew that I was getting double-crossed.

I wanted to get my shot in first. I had another buyer for the chip in my head. That would have been thematically and contextually appropriate, but I was explicitly unable to do any of that.

I've had a degree of dissonance playing *Cyberpunk 2077*. I'm visiting Night City years after everyone else, yes, but this is 2.2 – *the* definitive version. However, my efforts to play it my way, as opposed to how the developers want me to, makes a mockery of its Steam tags: Cyberpunk, Open World, RPG. To put it in terms the denizens of Night City would understand, I'm doll-chipped. But I'm conscious.

I play most things as Lawful/Neutral Good. Proportionate, righteous violence, but no casual murder. Here, I'm obligated to be a killer and thief, and that's that. Even a gun with a non-lethal mod can only be earned by killing, and killing the poor and the disenfranchised.

ORIGINAL CYBERPUNK

I was playing as me – a better looking, younger, me anyway – which seemed appropriate when presented with character creation tools. And to be clear, I'm an original cyberpunk. I grew up in the '80s, soaked in black rain and smoky neon. I was the guitarist in a band called Chrome Orchid. Now I'm actually there, shouldn't I like it more?

I put my gut-feelings under the scrutiny of some experts, like Lorne Nudel, a senior writer at Ubisoft, and a producer of games for Pixar and Universal, who also teaches storytelling through ELVTR UK and Game Story Writer. He vehemently disagrees with my first issue:

"Giving the player the choice to senselessly kill Dexter would destroy an essential element of the entire story. Dexter's betrayal, far from having no bearing, is the inciting incident of the story, akin to Joel getting saddled with Ellie. The rug pull can become a tired trope when deployed lazily. If serving a meaningful purpose however, it can be essential."

I'm not entirely convinced. The story requires I end up at the tip, yes, but that doesn't necessitate the proscribed betrayal. But if we end up in the same place, should the journey be proscribed in this way?

PUT THE RP IN RPG

Writer/illustrator Kim Hutson, former lead producer on *Starmourn*, sees this tendency as a function of finance, as well as storytelling, but wants some RP in her RPGs. "I had this exact issue with *Fallout 4*, and *Starfield*, but free-to-play games do this as they run out of content." She sees a place for tropes, even the more obvious ones.

"When writing, a two-dimensional character who it's OK to judge and discard can draw your MC into focus. If I'm illustrating a police chase, you can have silhouettes of cops in the background of a more detailed suspect... but in a game, you really need both, *and* for the player to have agency so the player needs to feel like their input and decisions are impacting the world."

She recognises, however, that agency can and should have limits. "I remember playing a demo of *BLOOD* way back when, and the fact that I got to decide to smash a window, or push a light switch, was what made it stand out. Yet, I just started playing *South of Midnight* and was initially frustrated by the lack of interactivity in the surroundings. But... if you're

KIM HUTSON
Former lead producer, *Starmourn*

DR IVAN GIRINA
Senior lecturer in Game Studies, Brunel University

LORNE NUDEL
Senior writer, Ubisoft

LIMITED AGENT MAN

Am I playing this, or is it playing me?

IF WE END UP IN THE SAME PLACE, SHOULD THE JOURNEY BE PROSCRIBED IN THIS WAY?

frantically trying to save your mother, you wouldn't be picking up every random potted plant. A lot of people lose urgency, worrying that they'll miss something important. So, I quite like that being taken away for the sake of immersion."

AGENCY LIFE

Dr Ivan Girina, a senior lecturer in Game Studies at Brunel University London, inevitably takes a theory approach, "Less characterisation can lead to more identification. When more predefined, as in *Assassin's Creed* or *The Witcher*, the narrative can feel more coherent and immersive. In contrast, *Cyberpunk 2077* offers extensive customisation, and this can result in a mismatch between the perceived character's depth and how much it impacts the game world.

"There's an aesthetic pleasure in making choices and seeing their consequences, but agency is now less associated with a sense of freedom [in critical studies] as a balance between constraints and affordances,

Even in Night City, they know playing music out loud on a train is the worst.

where constraints create urgency or invisibly guide choices. Thus, agency is often critiqued as a synthetic pleasure of mastery."

He means the illusion of choice, and I'm all for that. I don't mind ending up at the tip after all. He goes on, "Agency is also in our relationship with games. The more we experience, the more it highlights the lack of it in reality. Interestingly, *Cyberpunk 2077* critiques our relationship with technology and potential alienation from it, acting as a meta-critique of videogames themselves."

BAMBOOZLED

I'm a fan of how the *Far Cry* games offer a way out of the inevitable bloodbath. Conversely, *Read Dead Redemption 2*, gave me a string of

YOU'RE LIMITED IN THE MOST PART TO WORKING FOR ONE CORPORATION OR OTHER

failed heists, because Arthur resisted the truth I could see, as he was resisting the changes in his world. But *CP2077* can feel like I'm playing the No Russian level of *Modern Warfare 2* over and over again. I see the systems and understand them. After all, 'would you kindly' was a long time ago. I want to be bamboozled so I can pretend otherwise. However, Nudel believes that I need to buy into the experience more: "Player choice is only an illusion to those rejecting the game's thematic project. Players are bound to a fantasy's limits and operating within them is what games are, by definition. Obfuscating those rails, while not the purpose of a game, is part of the craft of seamless narrative design, which aims to deliver an experience that feels self-directed."

That much we agree on. He continues, "There are meaningful choices, like whether to work with Meredith Stout, not to mention the game's final choice. But that is always bounded by story. A game with full player freedom is no longer a story, but a playground, and while stories can happen, random events are not stories from a narrative perspective. That *Cyberpunk 2077* is an RPG means that the player is playing a role. A role's limits make it a role."

SAVE THE WORLD

While I appreciate the distinction, what is my role? I can't save the world, or even improve it a little. You're limited in the most part to working for one corporation or other, left to beat up on the powerless and poor, or take Johnny's dark route to mass-murder. Was this a conscious choice on the part of CDPR? Is that the point? Nudel believes so, "Perhaps the message is indeed that when unfettered necro-capitalism takes hold, all we will have left is to kill each other. Frankly, I feel persuaded. Night City is a prison to many, and the struggle to get ahead can seem pointless by design. The failed heists serve the theme of greed and betrayal in a corrupt system. The player can choose how they fight, but they cannot beat the grinding machine of capitalism – a cyberpunk genre convention."

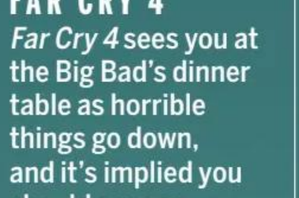
Bunel's Ivan Girina, likewise, sees this as diegetic powerlessness. "The character is forced to be involved and engage with large institutions. It's a generic cyberpunk premise – these corporations are encompassing engines of desire and control, commodifying synthetic pleasures, digital identities and technological freedom to re-inscribe undesirable human elements, at a cost. The choice of protest is seen as futile."

WHO CARES?

CP2077 is one of the best-selling games of all time. If I feel unrepresented or corralled by it, am I simply playing the wrong game? Girina thinks not, "The question of 'representation' is complex and politically loaded, often opposed to that of artistic freedom. The game is coherent in its investment within the cyberpunk genre, denouncing – while also replicating – the violence of a man-made world of technological power and control, in which the only

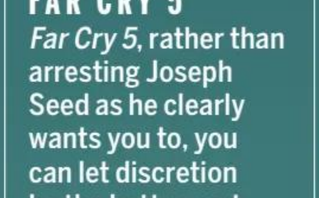
HEART OF...NEVER MIND

You don't have to go on that rampage



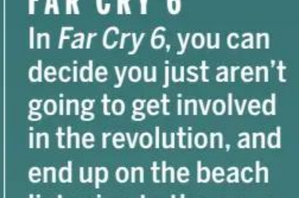
FAR CRY 4

Far Cry 4 sees you at the Big Bad's dinner table as horrible things go down, and it's implied you should escape and begin your adventure. However, you can wait and resolve your story.



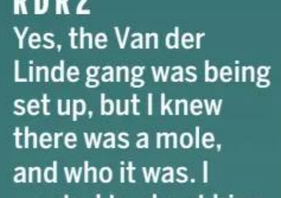
FAR CRY 5

Far Cry 5, rather than arresting Joseph Seed as he clearly wants you to, you can let discretion be the better part of valour and leave Hope County before everything falls apart.



FAR CRY 6

In *Far Cry 6*, you can decide you just aren't going to get involved in the revolution, and end up on the beach listening to the news of what you opted out of. I appreciated the game more for that lack of agency.



RDR2

Yes, the Van der Linde gang was being set up, but I knew there was a mole, and who it was. I wanted to shoot him the minute I met him in Strawberry. I couldn't without perma-failing.

revolution possible is one obtained through violent means. On the other hand, a different – more pacificist – option could have provided more venues for innovation and experimentation. In this sense, the game reflects larger trends in the industry, for which AAA games increasingly lack experimentation and consequent crystallisation within generic formulas, at the intersection between market research and financial costs, so they find an already beaten path to their audience."

Lorne Nudel argues that that I'd be better served elsewhere, "Games and stories have no responsibility to represent everyone or indeed anyone. Stories may be a place for people to see themselves in others – fantasies, even mirrors, not for who you are, but who you might be. If a game does not offer the player a way to evade the dilemmas, then it's because those dilemmas are inseparable from the story. So, if players feel they cannot do whatever they want and that is what they came for, they are playing the wrong game."

I think part of the reason that *CP2077* hasn't totally grabbed me – although I'm 80 hours in – is it makes me sad. The years accumulated since first renting Blade Runner, while wearing shades indoors, have made me look at the game in a different way than that callow youth would have. Night City's diversions are the most juvenile and prurient possible. I see a possible end of our society reflected in its world.

Girina is sympathetic, "In a way, the game mirrors contemporary issues and questions around the possibility of protest in an age of total data, in which voices, faces, political ideas expressed in public are automatically recorded, easily scanned and made into data, and made available for governments and companies alike."

My last question to Nudel is how *CP2077* seemed to him, given the last five years of real-world politics. He says: "Prescient?"

EDGERUNNERS

Watching the Netflix series, I sympathised with David's tragedy. His upbringing and experience explained his decisions. Not choices I would have made, but it wasn't my story. I asked Rafał Jaki, the showrunner, now working on *Witchfire*, whether creating good linear narratives is easier than creating good interactive ones, or whether it comes with its own complications attached.

"For sure it's easier if you look at it from the perspective of the complexity of the task – if you have a game with a branching narrative, not only you should track what the character is doing, but also where and when. Playing *Skyrim*, I did the whole 'become the Archmage' storyline, but right after that the guard of the magic school asked me who I was. In that moment the suspension of disbelief was shattered. Nothing I did mattered anymore, as the game did not 'see me' and my actions. Whereas on *Edgerunners*, my main concern was plot, characters, or lore, and I could manufacture an ideal situation. Not that linear writing is easy – it just has fewer moving parts to execute on the vision and artistic intent." ■

DOWN BY THE RIVER

For the first anniversary of **BALDUR'S GATE III**, PC Gamer spoke exclusively to **SWEN VINCKE** about the past, present and future of Larian Studios

WORDS
Fraser Brown

ILLUSTRATION
John Strike

Swen Vincke

It's early summer, almost a year since Larian launched *Baldur's Gate III* – a year in which the studio has collected a vast number of awards and accolades for its monumental RPG – and the team has swapped the Forgotten Realms for the swelteringly hot Spanish city of Barcelona. Larian is here to discuss its next game behind closed doors. A couple of days ago, on July 8, it held a summit to talk about kicking off a new RPG. "Lift off," as CEO Swen Vincke puts it.

There's the crackle of electricity in the air, not because a dragonborn sorcerer has just cast chain lightning, but because the team is about to set off on a brand-new adventure. Larian's developers are now spread all over, including Dublin, Ghent, Warsaw and here in Barcelona, where so many of them have gathered. Much of the excitement, then, is also down to a lot of them being in one place, rather than distributed across the world.

It wasn't all that long ago that Larian was comparatively tiny. "These are guesstimates," says Vincke, "but I think that *Divinity: Original Sin* must have been around 40 people, and then *Divinity: Original Sin II* was around 120-ish. And now we're approaching 500." The new Warsaw studio has added a chunk, and Vincke says that it's "beefed up" QA, adding more internal playtesters to prepare for what's coming next.

So what is coming next? Well, that's a secret that Larian's not quite ready to share. Chatting to members of the studio following the summit, however, reveals a lot, from hints about the scope of its next two projects to why the team stopped working on what was shaping up to become *Baldur's Gate IV*.

TOP LARIAN HITS

Liked Baldur's Gate III? Then play these, too

DIVINE DIVINITY 2002
An action-RPG with plenty of hack-and-slash action, if you like *Diablo* then you'll like this.

DIVINITY: DRAGON COMMANDER 2013
Larian does an RTS with politics, strategy and, yes, dragons.

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2014
A game-changing release for Larian.

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II 2017
Larian released another superb fantasy RPG.

BELOW LEFT: Taking on Raphael in his House of Hope. What an encounter!

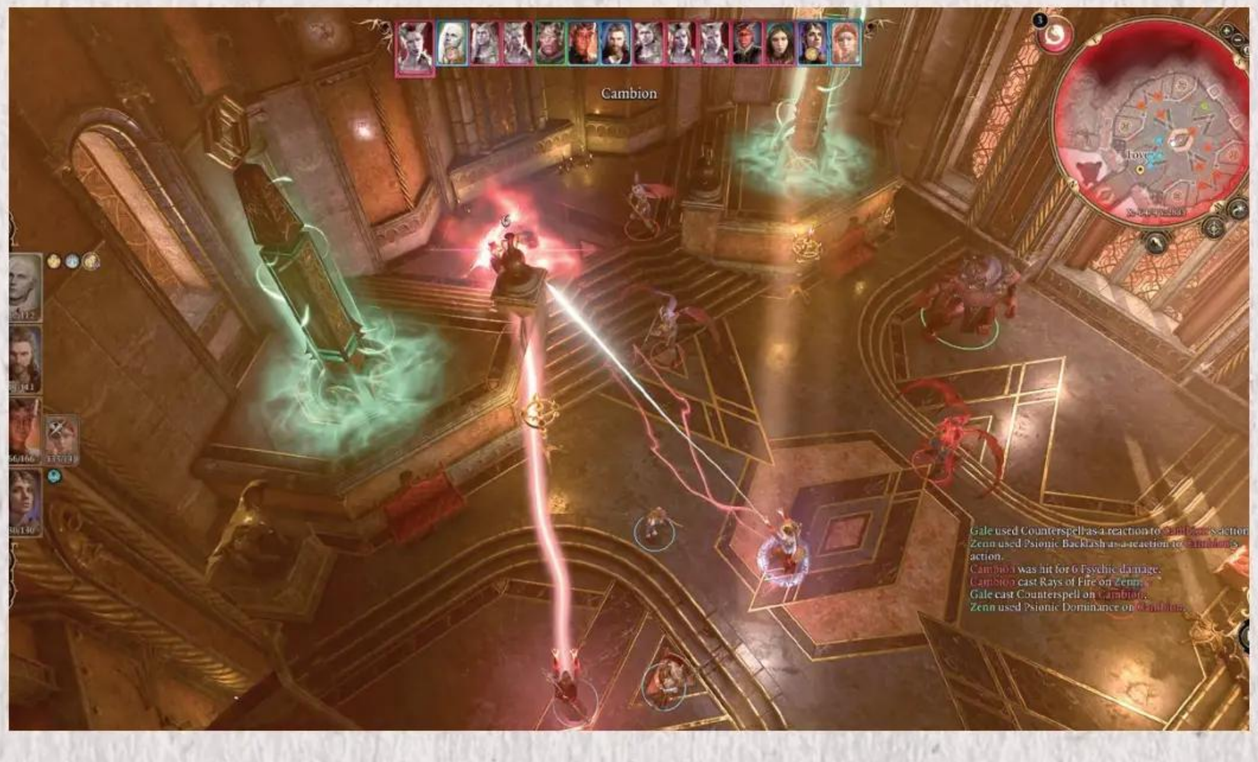
BELOW RIGHT: Strong armour choice there.

LITTLE BIG DEVELOPER

Years ago, I visited Larian's Ghent studio for the conclusion of *D:OSII*'s successful Kickstarter, and while it had grown considerably after *D:OS*, it still had this small studio energy. Writing director Adam Smith, who joined Larian for *Baldur's Gate III* after years in the games journalism trenches, reckons that energy continues to be maintained despite the huge growth: "I was a big fan of Larian, and my biggest fear joining Larian was growth might make it not the studio that I saw from when I'd spoken to Swen and other people in the past. It hasn't changed. I mean, it's crazy."

"I call it chaos at scale," Vincke adds. "We're a studio that gives a lot of freedom to developers. We encourage it, actually, bottom up, because it's unmanageable otherwise. Different people have to do their own thing. And then obviously, we have to manage the chaos that comes out of it, so that's a large part of the job. But the fact that we start like that, and we have been on purpose keeping studios not too large – so they're basically people that all know each other still, which is a very important part – is the thing that makes it work. It's as simple as that. So it is just empowering developers themselves."

This structure of flexibility and experimentation conveniently matches Larian's design philosophy, which Vincke describes as "player first, always". And this has been evident across all of the studio's games, where player agency is paramount. "I started my summit here by literally telling [Larian], treat the player like you would want to be treated. That's literally how you should make a game. I keep on repeating, if you see something in the game that you would not want to see in another game, don't do it – just keep on working on it, or don't do it at all." Larian's systems all stem from that rule, which is why its RPGs don't feel prescriptive. "If it's on rails, you can go to a theme park; this is not a theme park."



Swen Vincke

IT WASN'T ALL THAT LONG AGO THAT LARIAN WAS COMPARATIVELY TINY

Giving players access to powerful spells like teleportation or talking to corpses early on really encapsulates this philosophy. In *Baldur's Gate III*, you have so many ways to get out of a scrape, uncover hidden areas and get up to all sorts of mischief right away, rather than having to wait 50 hours before you can start truly doing what you want. But this also means Larian's games have to be designed in such a way that the developers must get into the players' heads and figure out what they might want to do.

"We have to foresee a whole bunch of things," says Vincke, "and then we have to make sure there's a fallback for all the things players will come up with." And then there needs to be all these rewards and motivators to keep players exploring. Fancy items, compelling storylines, big surprises. "And that's how we approach games. "So everything we do, every thing within the studio, is built to allow us to do more of that."

A PUBLISHER'S NIGHTMARE

One of the reasons Larian can do this is because it isn't beholden to anyone else. It's an independent studio that doesn't need to rely on publishers, and while it does have investment from the likes of Tencent, they don't have a seat at the table.

"If you see it, it'll scare you, as a shareholder, as a publisher," says Vincke. "The very first thing you will try to do is get it under control – you will try to scope it, you will try to box it, you will try to control it, which is exactly the opposite of what we want to do. These days, especially when you have so much entertainment, people are only going to put their time into something that keeps on engaging them. In the type of game that we make, that means that we need to have a lot of content, and you put a lot of content in there that never nobody's ever going to see. Which is really not obvious, right? Because it's like, why are we spending a million dollars on a dragon, which nobody's ever going to see, except like five people who made that obscure choice? Because if they see it, they have to be happy too. So that's why I put the bloody dragon there."

While Larian's approach would likely terrify a lot of publishers and investors, there's no doubt that many of them would still like a piece of this pie. The industry is obsessed with the studio, and all eyes are on what it's planning next. In the year since launch, it has undeniably become one of the world's most influential developers. But Vincke attributes its series of big successes, from *D:OS* onwards, to its biggest failure: *Divinity II: Ego Draconis*.

Ego Draconis was the third game in the *Divinity* series, following on from *Divine Divinity* and *Beyond Divinity*. Vincke recalls that it had a lot of things that could have made it a "breakthrough game", but unfortunately it didn't come together.

Swen Vincke

"It was ambitious, had a lot of stuff going on, but none of it was really well done," he says. "So everything was really the product of being too ambitious with too small a team and not having enough resources, and then the publisher insisted on releasing it when it wasn't ready. And so I fought very long and hard about that, because I thought about quitting at that point. You can't just go from failure to failure to failure. You've got to do something right. This is when I dropped publishers."

Vincke still believes the game had a lot going for it, like the combat and the narrative, even if the latter "didn't deliver". But Larian had attempted to do too much. "We couldn't do all these things because we were too small. So we needed to reinvent ourselves. I said, 'If we do one thing right, it has to be the combat, and you have to be able to play it with your friends'. And that was *D:OS1*. The story was really tacked on. *D:OS1* was a success, so I looked at that and said, 'Now we need to nail the story'."

As well as this reinvention came things like the complete dominance of digital distribution "and there weren't 320,000 middlemen that were just taking cuts on everything," as well as the rise of Kickstarter and

UNSURPRISINGLY, BALDUR'S GATE III HAS FILLED THE STUDIO'S COFFERS

Early Access. This helped Larian fund *D:OS* and its sequel, and then actually make money out of them. Now, though, it's in a position where it doesn't need Kickstarter. Unsurprisingly, *Baldur's Gate III* has filled the studio's coffers.

"We launched, and we were nervous as hell," Smith remembers. "Early Access helped with that, because you knew that people enjoyed what you had, but it was still really nerve-racking. And I remember at some point in the night, we were having a celebration. We were looking at the Steam numbers, seeing the numbers going up and up and up. And the first time I spoke to Swen after launch, I said something like, 'Did you expect this?' And he said, 'You know what this means? It means we get to do it again'."

THE SUMMER OF RPGS

Baldur's Gate III launched during a busy summer for RPGs. *Diablo IV* had just arrived, and both *Starfield* and *Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty* were imminent. Larian shifted the release date to avoid a clash. "Big comes before small," says Vincke. "The biggest release gets the space, and then the others have to move for it. This has always been a universal truth. So we recognised *Starfield* as a bigger game than us. That's why we had to move. Players were not going to be playing multiple RPGs of this size at the same time. That's impossible. So you were going to force players to make a choice, so we said, 'OK, we'll take that choice away and move elsewhere.'"

Instead of *Starfield* sucking all the oxygen out of the room when it launched, however, *Baldur's Gate III*

kept selling, and continues to. Since launch, Larian has released a large number of patches and hotfixes, squashing bugs as well as adding new features, an epilogue, more evil options – countless additions, tweaks and treats. But now *BGIII* is done, for the most part.

"A complete experience," says Vincke. "There's lots of stuff we wanted to do that we ended up not doing. People always ask what are the features that you didn't want to cut. But in fairness, I think you got what you paid for when you start playing the game. You got a good experience. You had a lot of choices, you were rewarded for those choices, the game respected them in many, many ways. You got a good character development experience. You had fun in combat – lots of tactical combat that you can approach in many, many different ways. These were the things we wanted to create. We're moving on, in our hearts the game is done."

Larian has been discussing *Baldur's Gate III* for years, and working on it for a lot longer, so while Vincke and Smith still talk about it with enthusiasm and eagerly share anecdotes about its development, it's tinged with, if not exhaustion, then at least a readiness to be done with the game. *Baldur's Gate III* was initially planned to be a one-shot. No expansions. No sequels. At least not from Larian. But there was a period when more *Baldur's Gate* was on the cards.

BALDUR'S GAOL

"So if something is super successful, obviously everyone's [asking] you, 'When are you going to make the next one?'", says Vincke. "And when you, as a developer, come out of this little miserable cave that you've been sitting in for many, many hours as you're finishing your thing, you're vulnerable. You're emotionally drained, because you don't know what the reaction of the people is going to be; there's so much hope and anticipation in there, there's a lot of responsibility. So you tend to be prone to do the obvious thing, which was really just make an add-on, or a standalone add-on, or start working on a sequel, because it's the easiest route to take. And we actually started doing that, because we've got the engine, got everything in here, all we need to do is add extra levels – how hard can it be?

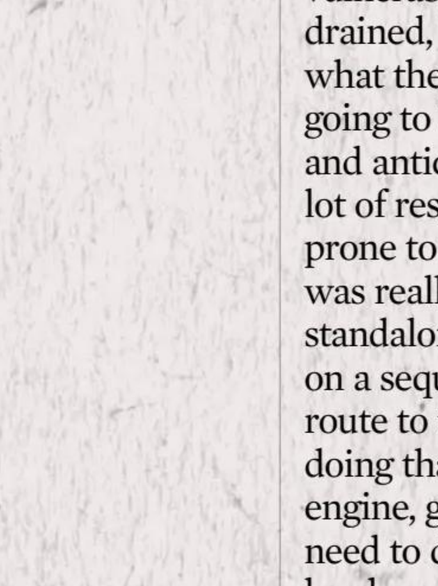
"It's something that you all would have liked, I think. I'm sure, actually. And we actually went pretty fast, because the production machine was still warm. You could already play stuff. But you played it and you looked and it, and, like, you know, this is OK. I mean, we'll probably have to redo it ten times. And do we really want to do this for the next three years? Because we thought we'd make it in one year, and then you could see it's not going to happen, it's going to take two, three years. And having just done six years of D&D, which is not our own thing, are we really going to spend all this time on this and abandon our own plans? Yeah, maybe not for an add-on, but maybe *Baldur's Gate IV*? That makes a lot of sense. So why don't we do it for *Baldur's Gate IV*? Oh, yeah, that sounds like a good idea. Let's make *Baldur's Gate IV*. All the stuff that we did for this thing, we can just move it in there, people are gonna love it. Go for it. And then the same thought process again."

At this point, Vincke dramatically sighs, reliving the moment he decided he didn't want to be trapped in a D&D-shaped prison. "Another X amount of years, same thing, exactly the same mechanics, same problems that we actually already solved, just evolving them. And then you start looking at the other things that you had planned and pushing them back, and then you've come back to your senses, because by then the vulnerability is gone."

Staring ahead at this less than ideal future, Vincke stopped thinking about the easiest route. "We should be looking at how we can do stuff that we get excited about." After a long overdue break during Christmas, he had a reality check, and then talked to the team about the prospect of moving on. "It very rapidly turned, and I don't think, as developers, we ever felt better since we took that decision. Honestly, you really cannot explain or express it, how liberated we are. So morale is super high, just

LARIAN STUDIOS FACT FILE

A dev with serious heritage



Founded: 1996

Founder: Swen Vincke

Headquarters: Ghent, Belgium

Studios: seven: Ghent, Quebec City, Dublin, Kuala Lumpur, Guildford, Barcelona, Warsaw

Employees: 470 (as of 2024)

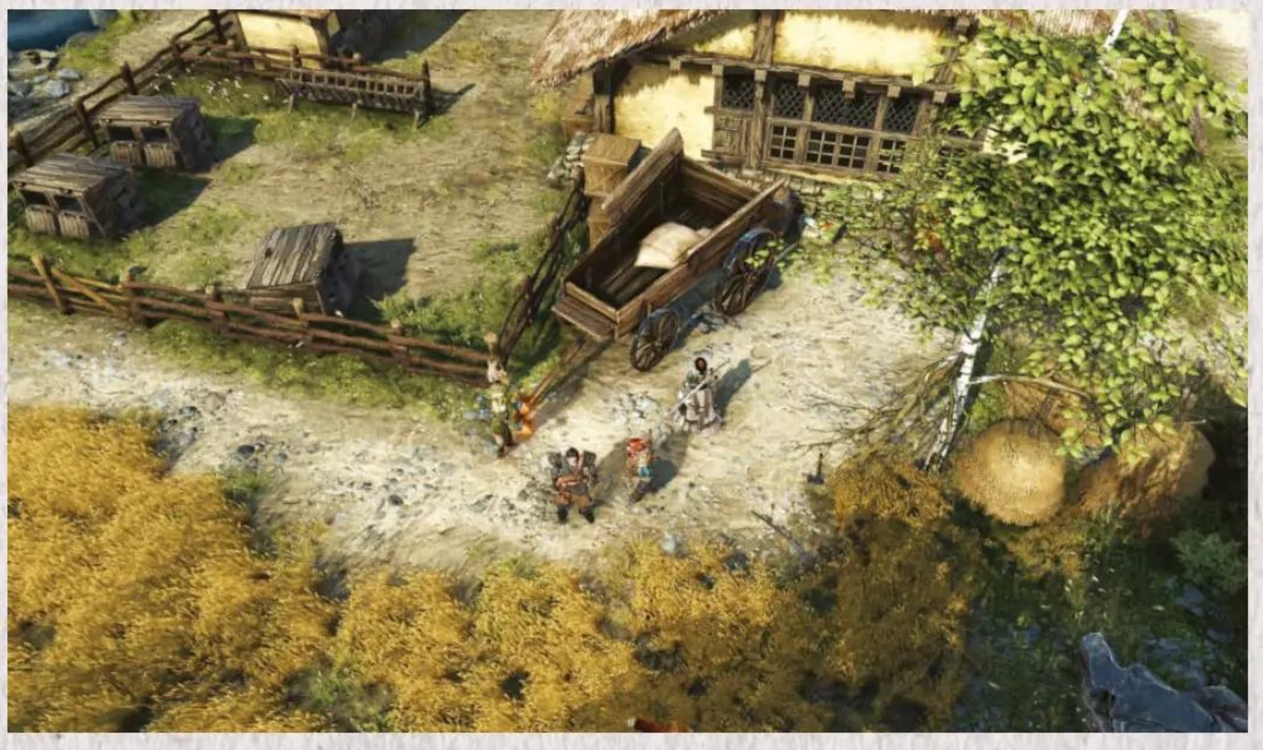
First project: *The Lady, the Mage and the Knight* (unreleased)

Notable releases: *Divinity* series, *Baldur's Gate III*

Website: larian.com

BELOW LEFT: There can be only one!

BELOW RIGHT: You must gather your party before venturing forth.



Swen Vincke

because we're doing new stuff again. We're doing our own thing again, we're not rehashing, we're not trying to convert rules from 50 years ago into something new."

Vincke and Smith emphasise that it was not so much an issue with D&D – "It will always be one of the coolest things I ever did," says Smith – but that Larian was tired and needed something new to energise it again. "It needs to get the spark," says Vincke. "What we did here at the summit was pitch to our own teams. 'So this is the stuff that we're doing, are you excited?' It's the question everyone was asking: are you excited? You have to have that.

DOUBLING DOWN

While one is further along, the plan is to develop two new games concurrently, but that's already proving to be a challenge. "We had some people who were dedicated to the other one, and they just got swallowed by the ambitions of the one that we want to release first," says Vincke. "So we will try to do it concurrently, but we have to figure out how to leave people alone."

With two games on the slate, one might imagine that Larian's going to rein in its ambitions, at least when it comes to each individual game. But that's not a very Larian thing to do. "We always say we do," says Vincke, "but then we start thinking, and the machine is meant to make large games.

"We were made for making large, ambitious RPGs and to try new stuff. One of the core problems – it's not really a problem – but one of the core problems to do what you're suggesting is that we actually know what we want from our gameplay systems, how to evolve them, how to do new things... and they're all big."

One of the tricky parts of following up a very big game with more big games is trying to find new things to fill them with. "One of the biggest problems we have now is that whenever we're talking about things, we say we did that in *Baldur's Gate III*," says Smith. "And it turns out, we did a lot of things in *Baldur's Gate III* when we think back to it. But it was the same during development. Have they already seen this pattern? Have they already used these verbs in this order? Have they already had this emotional arc? So you're constantly trying to make sure that they're getting a new experience, and you're not just repeating yourself, and you're not just giving them content for the sake of content."

It's not scale for the sake of scale, either. A short RPG can be a great RPG, like *Disco Elysium*, but as Smith points out it's a very different kind of RPG from the ones that Larian makes. "[*Disco Elysium*] is a case. It's still a journey, but it's much more contained. And it's a very different psychological journey. In a party-based game, especially in a multiplayer party-based game, you need people to be able to go off and do their own thing for a while, discover their own stories."

Even with the massive size of *Baldur's Gate III*, Larian still struggled to find space for all the stories it wanted to tell. It was actually envisioned as larger, initially. Wyll had his own area, the Red War College. Instead of meeting Gortash in Baldur's Gate, players would meet him in Candlekeep, where the first *Baldur's Gate* began. There was a Shadow Druids hangout, a gnome village, and a map that could be explored in a non-linear fashion just like the original games. These were cut for a variety of reasons, but one of the key issues was that they were smaller areas, leading to fewer ways for players to be able to express themselves and do their own thing. Larian opted for fewer but larger areas where more things could happen. But that also necessitated finding new homes for some characters and story beats.

On the subject of new homes, is Larian interested in leaving its well-trodden fantasy realms behind? Both Rivellon and the Forgotten Realms share a great deal, and Vincke and Co have been dabbling in this sandbox for decades. "Yes, of course," Vincke says. "There's so many things that I would like to do. Just so little things that you can do. So there's really a lot I would like to do..." And not for the first time during this interview Vincke catches

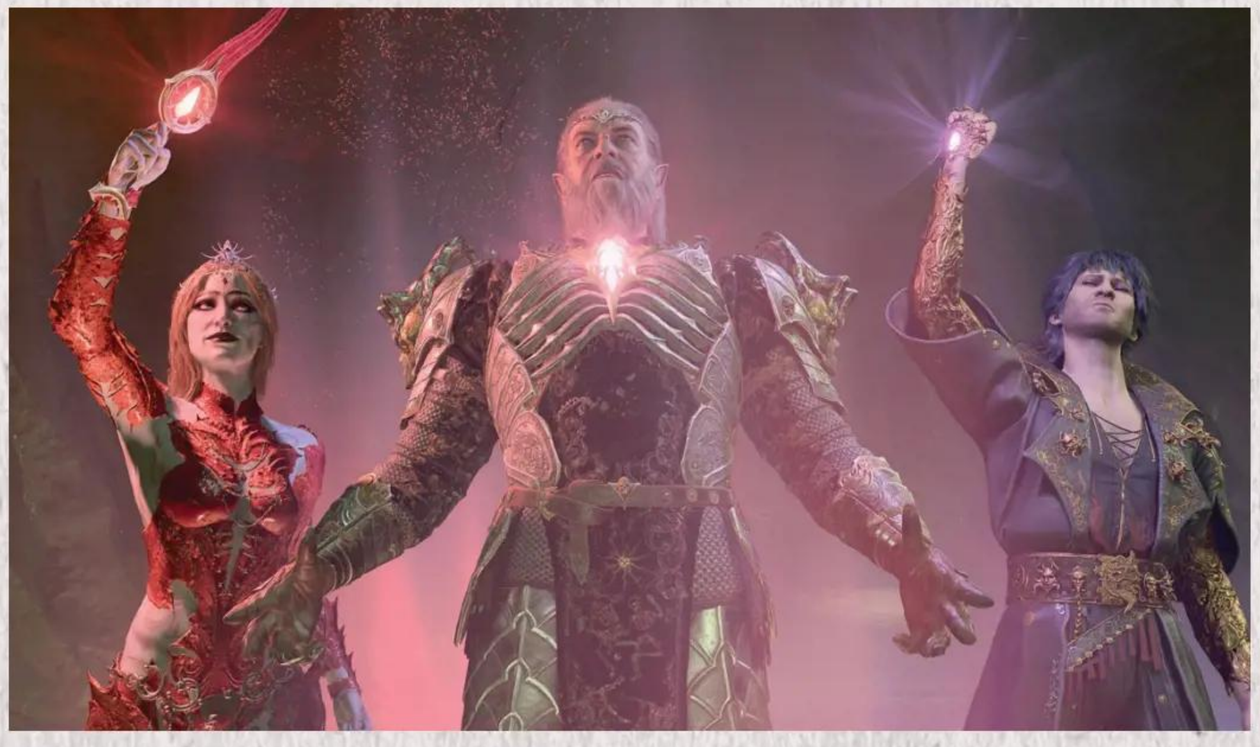
BALDUR'S GATE III BRILLANCE

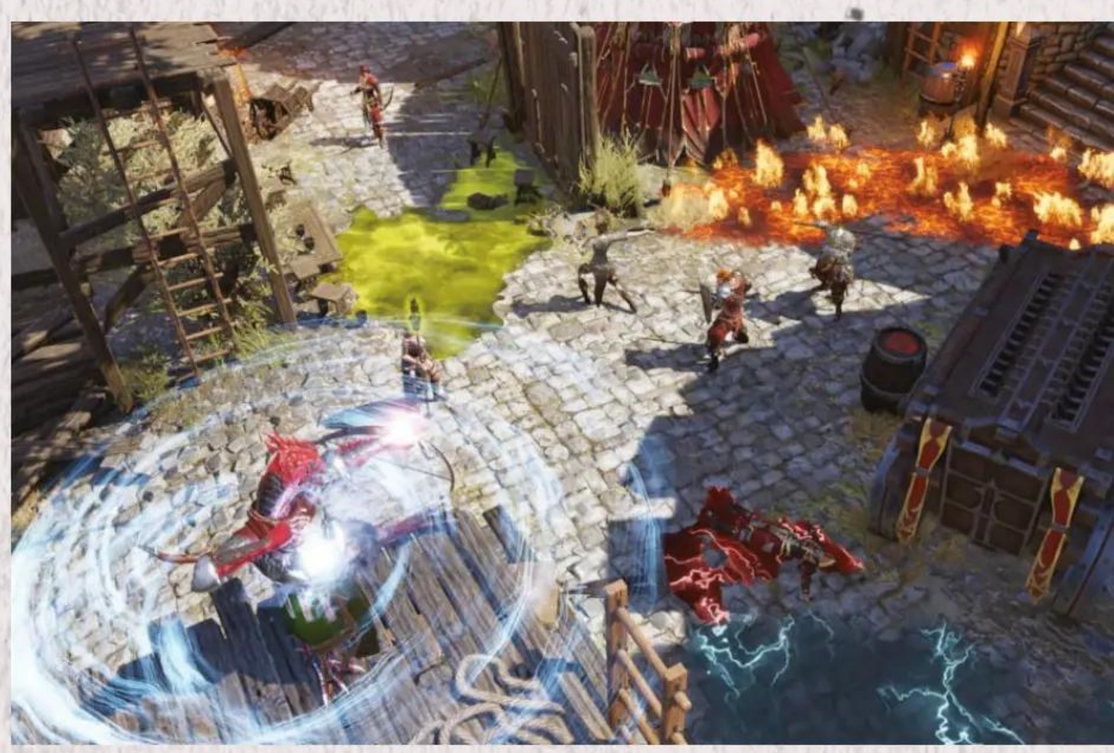
The astonishing trophy hall

Baldur's Gate III has, to date, won more than 32 individual game awards, including a clean sweep of all major Game of the Year awards, including top gongs at the Golden Joystick Awards, Game Awards, GDC Awards, BAFTAs and DICE Awards, as well as being awarded PC Gamer's own Game of the Year Award.

BELOW LEFT: A triumvirate of incredibly well written, memorable baddies.

BELOW RIGHT: Larian is a master of offering gamers creative and fun gameplay opportunities.





"WE WERE MADE FOR MAKING LARGE, AMBITIOUS RPGS AND TO TRY NEW STUFF"

himself about to give too much away, and clamps up. He won't be falling for any of my brilliant traps, it seems.

IP BINGO

While Larian is back doing its own thing, it's hard not to hope that it will eventually take on another existing property, maybe something that's been languishing for years. One series Vincke often discusses is *Ultima*, and in many ways the *Divinity* games are love letters to Richard Garriott's classic RPGs. Indeed, when Vincke was considering properties for Larian to work on, before it got its hands on D&D, *Ultima* was on the list, along with *Fallout*. Broaching the subject now, however, he seems to be mostly over the idea. "That's Richard Garriott's thing," he says.

"I love *Ultima*," adds Smith, "but I don't think it needs to come back. The thing about *Ultima* for me was, *4*, *5* and *6* I absolutely love, but *7*, it might be my favourite game. But I don't know. Like, would you remake *Ultima 7*? I don't know what you'd want to do. With *Baldur's Gate*, there was a world I was interested in. There were characters and there was a story that felt like they could continue, and themes that were very strong. *Ultima*, each game... they're very independently themed."

The most interesting component, the thing worth exploring, Smith says, is the virtue system. He'd be interested in going back to the earlier *Ultimas*, "Where it's like, how do you make an RPG that treats combat as a violent thing that is not good, which is one of Garriott's original ideas. You make RPGs or games where you hit things on the head and looted them. And he said, 'Well, what if, actually, that is a bad thing to do. What if you have to try and find peaceful solutions?' That's really interesting, but that happens across the board in RPGs now, so it's not as interesting a question as it was. So yeah, it's not a rich world to me."

Despite this, Vincke isn't closing the door entirely. "Never say never," he says. "There's another developer who I'd love to work with one day in my life and we'd get along really well. I can't tell you who, but he's a big *Ultima* fan, so you never know."

What's clear, though, is that Vincke and Smith are much more excited to be free to create things that are uniquely theirs, playing in sandboxes of their own creation without the constraints of a ruleset that somebody else conjured up. And while, yes, as a D&D fan it is a shame to see Larian leave *Baldur's Gate* behind, it's thrilling to know that the best RPG developers around are now free to take what they achieved in *Baldur's Gate III* and push it forward or in other directions without limitations. For the last ten years, Larian's trajectory has been 'bigger and better', so its next adventure could be its most impressive. For now, though, only Larian knows what it's going to be. ■

PARAFR

DISECT

The making of **CRYSIS**, PC gaming's most notorious rig-killer

By Rick Lane

Crysis

When Ubisoft published *Far Cry* on March 23, 2004, it was a watershed moment in gaming. Casting players as an ex-soldier battling mercenaries across a tropical archipelago, *Far Cry* dragged first-person shooters out of tight linear corridors into vast, open-ended levels. A glimpse of gaming's future, *Far Cry* was a hit, selling 2.5 million copies and spawning one of the most successful shooter series of the last 20 years.

Inside Crytek, the neophyte German studio that had developed *Far Cry*, the general feeling was euphoric. "The ego was boosted across the board," says Cevat Yerli, Crytek's founder and former CEO, and *Far Cry*'s director. "Everybody was like, 'We can build *Far Cry 2* in a year!'" Ubisoft was likewise keen for Crytek to capitalise upon its success, and follow-up *Far Cry* with a rapidly-produced sequel using its remarkable CryEngine tech.

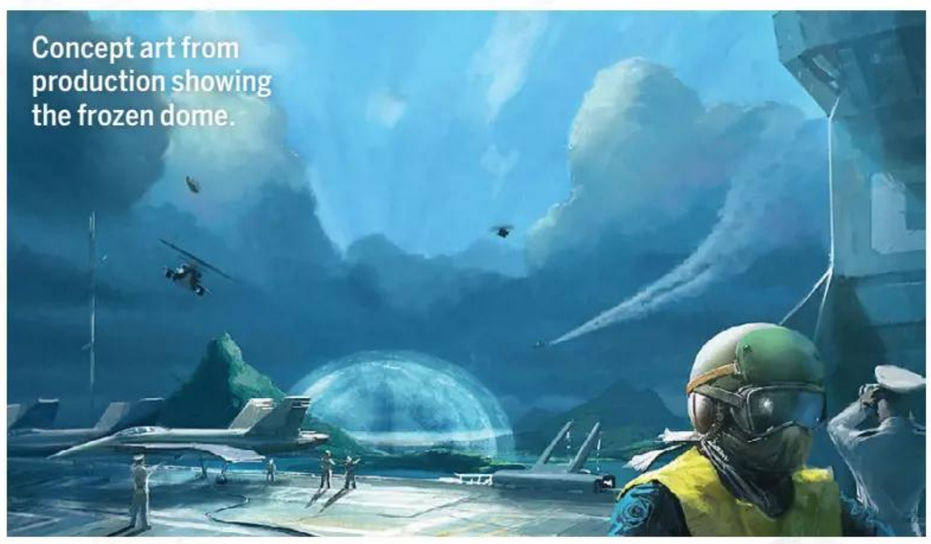
But Yerli wasn't so sure. "We had never done a game before as a team," he explains. "When you think you know how to do it, often that's when people stumble and make huge mistakes. So I said, 'Is there a way for us to manifest that learning and that excitement?' I want to be sure we are not a culture that goes into 'sequel-itis' like, sequel after sequel."

Instead, Yerli wanted to take everything Crytek had learned from making *Far Cry*, and use it to rebuild everything they'd made from the ground up. He wanted to establish a whole new IP and build it in a whole new engine, one that would push everything *Far Cry* did further than before. "I said to the team, 'Let's look at how we focus on true innovation, and let's, let's push ourselves again, a lot harder.'" It was in this moment when *Crysis*, PC gaming's most storied, memetic son, was born.

UP AND RUNNING

For anyone remotely familiar with PC gaming, *Crysis* needs no introduction. Synonymous with PC gaming's desire to push hardware to (and often beyond) its limits, Crytek's second FPS is one of the defining texts of the platform, more so even than *Far Cry*. Yet most people would probably not introduce it as 'true innovation' in the way Yerli does. From a game design perspective, it is largely an iteration upon *Far Cry*, playing with many of the same rules and ideas established by its older brother.

From a technological perspective, *Crysis* can accurately be described as revolutionary. Moreover, it was born out of a desire to give the world something it had never seen before. "*Crysis* before *Crysis* was called *Frozen Paradise*, as a codename," Yerli says. "We figured, 'What would be cool, what kind of scenario have people never seen before, neither in movies nor in games?'"



Concept art from production showing the frozen dome.

Yerli knew he wanted *Far Cry*'s follow-up to remain set in a jungle, because "deserts actually were done quite often, or cities and other environments". But he also didn't want to do a straight repeat of *Far Cry*'s tropical islands. "And we said, 'OK, how about we freeze the jungle?'" he explains. "This environment that should be sunny and beautiful and paradisiacal is now like the whole air freezes on your neck. It provides the feeling [that] death is awaiting you in this juxtaposition of beauty and coldness."

Much of *Crysis*' broader concept followed on from this. Crytek asked itself what kind of phenomena could possibly freeze a tropical environment, concluding that the only feasible answer was alien technology. "I want[ed] to make something more science fiction," Yerli explains. "And I wanted to use science fiction as a liberty to create new gameplay." The nanosuit would

eventually derive from this sci-fi focus. Aliens also made a focal point for a twist, which meant the game needed an adversary for the earlier part of the game. For this, Crytek settled on North Korean forces, which were more original than Nazi or Soviet forces, and less ethically knotty than the Middle East.

Crytek assembled all these ideas into a 'master screenshot', which encapsulated the game's premise. "We built a screenshot where we had a jungle all around, and then we had this dome that froze everything within [it]. And then [around] that dome, we had some aliens fighting against people. The project became *Operation Frozen Paradise*, and then eventually it became *Crysis*."

MAXIMUM STRENGTH

Crytek knew the game it wanted to make. Now the studio had to start building it. From the start, Yerli had wanted to build Crytek's next game in a new engine, as he was unsatisfied with CryEngine 1, despite it being a technical marvel of its own. "We were patching up a lot of things on the engine, and it didn't feel right," he says. This included, but was not limited to, a complete rewrite of the graphics renderer. "You build an engine and a game, and then you realise you could have done the engine better," Yerli observes.

Alongside this, Crytek needed to be able to create a frozen jungle, something CryEngine 1 was simply not built to do. "It allowed us to drill into things like snow shaders, frozen shaders," Yerli says. "Some of this work was really cool. The shader work that came out of this was mind blowing at times." In addition, Yerli wanted to push their representation of jungles forward wholesale, specifically pursuing not photorealism, but video realism.

FROM A TECH PERSPECTIVE, CRYSIS CAN BE ACCURATELY DESCRIBED AS REVOLUTIONARY

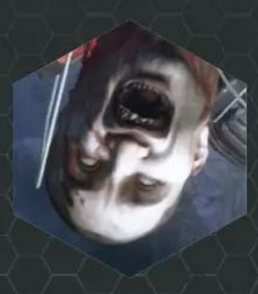
TOP: *Crysis*' original codename was *Operation Frozen Paradise*, which feels suitably apt.

"Video realism was about things in motion should look real, as opposed to [in] screenshots," Yerli says. "Video realism allowed us to study motion blur, depth of field, animations, physical reactions." The emphasis on physicality in *Crysis*, the authentic sense of weight, impact and momentum the game has, also derived from this. "Breakable trees came out of this, right? Where we said we got to have destruct[able] vegetation," Yerli adds.

Crytek sent a research team to Haiti to document how jungle environments looked and moved. "They took a gazillion photos and videos, and they studied the

ROLL CALL

Here's a reminder of your squadmates



AZTEC
Harold 'Aztec' Cortez is killed almost immediately after the opening HALO drop. If you remembered his name, congrats.

JESTER
Martin 'Jester' Hawker lasts slightly longer than Aztec, before being whisked away and brutally killed by a large alien machine.

PSYCHO
The most memorable member of Raptor squad, hot-headed cockney Martin 'Psycho' Sykes later starred in *Crysis*' expansion pack.

PROPHET
Arguably the true protagonist of the series, Prophet is killed at the start of *Crysis 2*. But his nanosuit memorises his personality.

light interactions with the trees and the canopies for god rays, and subsurface scattering... this soft, green translucency where the sun is behind [the leaf]," Yerli says. "Subsurface scattering was a technology that existed already in engines, but was super slow," he explains. "Nobody had done it at scale."

Indeed, creating the jungle environment that Crytek wanted for *Crysis* meant resolving one of the oldest dilemmas in 3D graphics tech. "The rule was: if you want photorealism, you had to bake the lights, and the shadows," Yerli says. Baked lights are pre-rendered lightmaps that are 'baked' into textures on walls and floors, like a coffee stain on a tablecloth. This makes them far cheaper to render than dynamic lights, but means they're forever fixed in place. "If you want to have dynamic worlds, your polycounts had to be low, and your lights and shadows had to be ugly," Yerli adds.

For *Crysis*, Yerli wanted high-quality dynamic lights and shadows, illuminating an open world environment. And that wasn't all, rendering a realistic jungle required vegetation in abundance, grass, bushes, trees, creepers, ferns. Moreover, that vegetation had to rustle, sway, and respond to physical interactions like characters brushing past. "We were simulating the trees for physics. We were bending them in different wind directions, and then eventually the light and the shadows will be all in real time, all the way to subsurface scattering on the leaves," Yerli says. This led to the studio joking, not entirely inaccurately, that in *Crysis*, "One tree has more technology built in than the entire algorithm for rendering *Far Cry*."

Crucially, Crytek didn't just apply this tech to trees, it also applied it to the characters moving about the game world. "There's a skin shader, the eyes are shaded correctly. Even the eye had like shadow within the eyeballs. Shadow maps [are] calculated for the face itself. So when the light was shining from a certain angle, the nose would cast a shadow." *Crysis* even had a shader that could make characters blush if required. "We went over bonkers on this one," Yerli says.

TOP: *Crysis*' jungle environments were breathtaking on release, and still look fantastic today.

ABOVE: Drivable vehicles added choice in how gamers could navigate the *Crysis*' vast open levels.

WARHEAD

Here's a selection of guns from Crysis' arsenal

SCAR
Crysis' fantastically versatile assault rifle let you attach a sniper-scope, a grenade launcher, a silencer and sleeper darts.

XM2014
An excellent example of the form, and there was nothing more satisfying than blasting an enemy before immediately turning invisible.

LAW
Crysis' single-use rocket launcher is not only incredibly satisfying, but essential for dealing with tanks.

MOAC
Short for 'Molecular Accelerator', using the Moac was one of the stronger elements of *Crysis*' third act.

LEFT: The visual design of *Crysis*' alien enemies was based on cephalopods.

FAR RIGHT: The sense of power *Crysis*' mode-switching nanosuit gave you was incredible.

NANO A MANO

In CryEngine 2, Crytek had world-leading tech to make their game with, more advanced than anything id Software or Valve or Epic had designed up to that point. But as the studio began to build and playtest levels, Yerli found himself unsatisfied with the results. "I was getting a bit angry," he says. "It was feeling like a much better version of *Far Cry* with aliens, but it didn't have any innovation on the hero." Crytek looked around at other popular FPS games, like *Halo* and *Half-Life*, concluding that their character needed a suit. "This idea of a programmable suit came up. And the way I was imagining it is, 'OK what are the different play styles that people have in shooters?' For example, when you play *Quake*, you play in a different way than when you play *Counter-Strike*," Yerli explains. "And then I was wondering, can I incorporate these play styles into one person, then you choose what you want to do?"

Crytek broke down the mechanical variables shooters have, like movement speed, jump height, damage resistance etc, and switched them from being passive traits to active abilities, all governed by a shared resource pool. When activated, these abilities allowed players could to sprint at *Sonic*-like speeds, punch through walls, shrug off bullets and turn invisible.

THE NANOSUIT'S ABILITIES GAVE CRYSIS' COMBAT A RICHER, MORE VARIED FEEL THAN FAR CRY

The nanosuit's abilities gave *Crysis*' combat a richer, more varied feel than *Far Cry*, treading on the toes of immersive RPG design in a way that heralded the trajectory of many later open world games. Helping players manage these abilities during a firefight proved a problem, however. "We had a whole UI mini-menu that almost micro-managed all the powers. And that [was] way too slow in the heat of the action." Yerli explains. "I said I needed a much faster, easier way to access [them] and it has to be on the mouse during the fight. So we came up with this radial menu."

The most difficult aspect of the suit to come with, however, was its visual design, which took an entire year. "We went through hundreds of concept arts, and they all looked like Marvel [characters] at the end. I did not want it to look like a Marvel creation," Yerli says. "I wanted to ground it on technology." One suggestion was made for the suit to be more of an exoskeleton. "But exoskeletons are ugly. Is there a way to make an exoskeleton without the exoskeleton?" Yerli asked. "This muscle suit came up, with nanofibres that would then connect with your muscle tissues and sync with your movements."

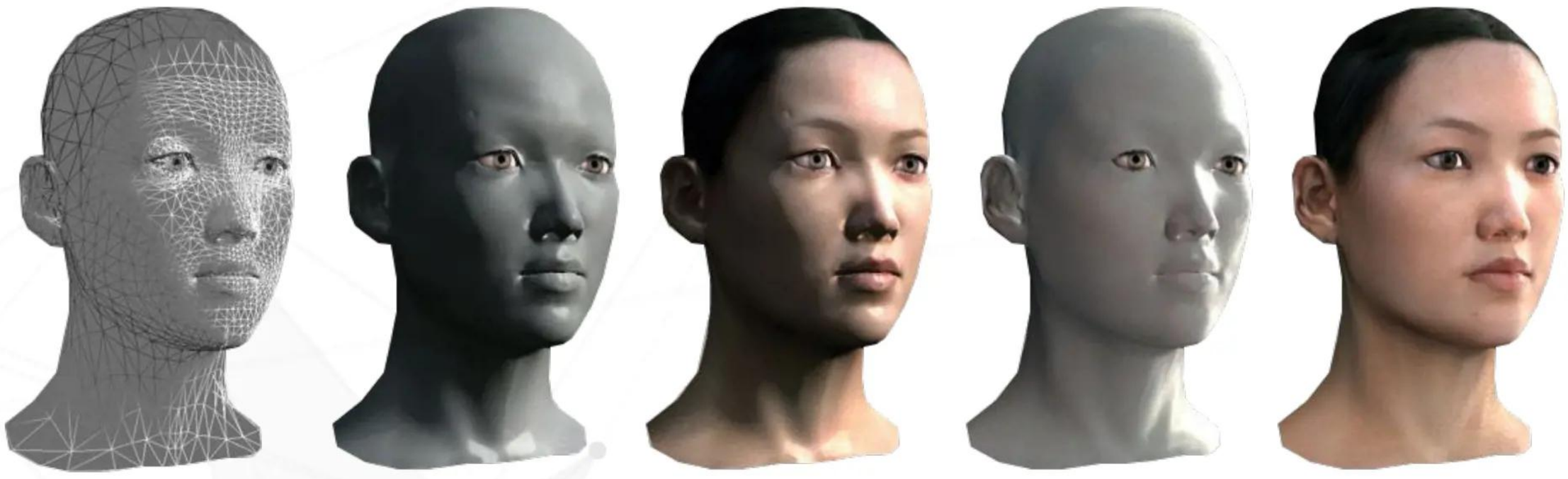
To Yerli, this felt like a more plausible nanosuit design, and was the one Crytek decided to go with. The decision was validated when Crytek launched the dedicated *Crysis* website, themed heavily around the nanosuit. "I got invited to a nanotechnology conference as a keynote speaker," he says. "I said, 'Excuse me, but this is all fake'."

CRYSIS AVERTED

Yerli describes the development of *Crysis* as being "a lot more intense" than that of *Far Cry*, but also "a lot more organised". Across the development of *Crysis*, the studio increased in size from 65 to 200 people, making it a much larger ship to steer. *Crysis* also took a year longer than *Far Cry* to develop, and 18 months longer than Crytek itself initially scoped for.

Nonetheless, lessons had been learned. When the studio made the

BELOW: Characters in *Crysis* benefitted from a dedicated skin shader and face shadow maps.



Crysis

LEFT: John Woo would be proud!

decision to rewrite CryEngine's renderer again, it happened halfway through development, rather than two months out from launch. Crytek also had a new publisher for *Crysis* in the form of EA, who were "a lot more demanding" than Ubisoft, but also crucial in keeping Crytek's much bigger team on task. "If we would have worked with EA on our first game, I think we would have not survived EA," Yerli says.

The biggest challenge Crytek faced on *Crysis* was designing the latter third of the game, which caused problems that Yerli admits were never fully resolved. This began with the zero-gravity level, in which protagonist Nomad ventures inside the alien spaceship. "Act three, the zero-G environment was a bit of a beast to tame, and changed the tone of the game a lot," he says.

Yerli believes the third act of *Crysis* introduced too many new elements. Following the zero-G section, Crytek introduces the frozen jungle, and switches the Korean soldiers, which players had become adept at fighting at this point, out for flying aliens. The approach to designing these extraterrestrial foes caused a rift within Crytek. "We had two camps in the company, where one was like, 'Let's build humanoid aliens,' and the other one was like, 'Let's build aliens that are maybe looking familiar to some degree, meaning they have some kind of cousin on Earth, but are still aliens'."

Crytek opted to create aliens inspired by cephalopods. Yerli loved the designs of the aliens at the time, but in hindsight considers them a mistake. "It would have been better for us if the aliens had been not what they were, and [had been] more humanoid and had a better story to explain why they're humanoid."

TOP RIGHT: Intense action and stunning visuals made *Crysis* an unforgettable experience for PC gamers especially.

BELOW: The back end of *Crysis* moves away from jungle environs, arguably to the game's detriment.

In general, Yerli says that from a gameplay perspective, the final third of *Crysis* "didn't work as well as we hoped it would" and that Crytek became overly focused on driving the story to its conclusion. "We tried a few concepts to keep the openness of the game, but were constrained by narrative, so we were focused on much more pushing the narrative of the game, as opposed to letting people explore." Although Yerli doesn't say so specifically, it's also possible the latter third of the game was victim to cuts. Certainly, as was the case with *Far Cry*, *Crysis*' scope was substantially pared back from initial plans. "There was a lot more content planned, and we had to pull characters and all that," Yerli says. "We cut it twice [in] half."

AMBIVALENT MEME

The run up to *Crysis*' launch was smoother than that of *Far Cry*, but still fraught with nerves. Yerli wanted to get the "packed list" of pre-launch bugs and issues to fix down to 1,000, but with weeks to go, there were 20,000 issues still to be resolved. "The game quality wasn't cutting it," Yerli says. He fretted over what review scores the game would get. "I estimated it was an 80-something title, 80-plus in my mind."

Crysis released on November 13, 2007 in the US, and three days later in the EU. Yerli recalls receiving

YERLI RECALLS RECEIVING NEWS OF PC GAMER US EDITION'S CRYSIS REVIEW: 98 OUT OF 100

news of PC Gamer's US edition review. "Rob Letts, the executive producer from EA, calls me up and says, 'Are you sitting?' I literally was sitting, in the bathroom. 'Can we talk later?' I said. 'No, I have to tell you now'. I said 'I'm in the bathroom'. And he said 'Oh. But you're sitting?'"

Undeterred, Letts relayed the review score, which was 98 out of 100. However, the phone cut out after the 9, so Yerli thought the score was 90. Later, Letts emailed Yerli the PDF of the review. "I will never forget that moment." Yerli says. "I called him up and I said, 'Hey, you told me 90. Are you kidding me? Is this real?'"

The reviews for *Crysis* were generally very positive, but trouble was brewing among broader fans, with reports that many players were struggling to run the game, ultimately leading to the famous meme 'Can it run *Crysis*?' According to Yerli, the performance debacle stemmed from a misunderstanding about what the graphics settings of *Crysis* were designed to do. "I want[ed] to make sure *Crysis* does not age, that [it] is future proofed, meaning that if I played it three years from now, it should look better than today." In other words, Yerli claims the higher-end settings of *Crysis* were designed for PCs years in the future. "[But] a lot of people tried to maximise *Crysis* immediately," he says. "And I'm like, 'Oh, that's not why we built the Ultra mode, or Very High'."

This may be true. It may also be convenient historical revisionism. But either way, the 'Can it run *Crysis*?' meme proved more of a benefit to the game's reputation than a detraction, cementing it in the PC gaming hall of fame. "It was this ambivalent kind of meme that was good and bad, but I actually enjoyed it." Yerli says. "Last year, Jensen [Huang] for Nvidia announced a new GPU, and they said, 'Yes, and it can run *Crysis*.'"

It's also true that, deliberate or not, *Crysis*' whopping technical demands did effectively future-proof it. Although the game received a remaster in 2021, the original version still looks almost as good as it did in 2007.

"*Crysis* had achieved the goal to be better than *Far Cry*, more impactful than *Far Cry*. But I also knew that after this one, it's going to be hard to impact, like repeat the day like this," Yerli says. He was right. *Crysis 2*, although a better game than it is often given credit for, undeniably suffered from its more restricted linear design. *Crysis 3* meanwhile was fine, but fairly forgettable. But all three games leave a legacy in their formidable engine, which alongside Crytek's own games has powered titles like *Prey*, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and is the basis for *Star Citizen*'s Star Engine. "I know for a fact, for Crytek today, still today, *Crysis* is the most important title ever launched. And for me personally, it is the same," Yerli concludes. ■

CRYSIS CHRONOLOGY

The series' story so far

CRYSIS
2007
The original and, most would agree, best *Crysis* game.

CRYSIS 2
2011
Crysis 2 lacked breadth in its levels, but its depiction of New York was super.

CRYSIS 4
UNKNOWN
After a decade-long hiatus, Crytek is working on a new entry in the series.

FAR CRY
2004
Technically not a *Crysis* game, but the series wouldn't exist without it.

CRYSIS: WARHEAD
2008
Crysis' excellent standalone expansion pack.

CRYSIS 3
2013
Crysis 3 felt a lot like *Crysis 2* but with a bow. Kind of like an expansion pack.

FIND IMMOR

Twenty-five years on, **PLANESCAPE: TORMENT** is still one of the most talked-about RPGs of all time. This is the story of how it was created as a 'stay-busy' project by a small team at Black Isle Studios

By Robert Zak

LING TALITY

Sigil, The City of Doors, isn't like other cities. It's not a place of orderly brick walls and cobbled streets, fuggy taverns and candlelit keeps. It's not inspired by myths, fairytales, or folklore, and it can't be contained in a single aesthetic; steampunk, biopunk, dieselpunk look sensible and uniform next to Sigil's rusting, jagged architectures; an inn may look like a chitinous fossil, a shop of curiosities may be framed by massive blades that look like they were designed to deter the grasp of a wrathful deity. And that alley over there? Watch closely, and it may just give birth to a new street before your eyes.

Even though you can eventually become familiar with Sigil's web of dreamlike rules – where a door might be a bloodstained cloth, or a key takes the form of a feeling – a thousand questions still remain: Who is the mysterious governess of the city, The Lady of Pain? What are her motives? How was Sigil created, and why is it floating like a planetary ring atop an impossibly tall

mountain in the middle of an spatially shifting wasteland?

While much of the Planescape setting remains a mystery, its videogame iteration is well charted, and something of a holy site for PC gamers, who regularly make the pilgrimage through Sigil and its neighbouring planes as The Nameless One and his not-so-merry band of companions. Zeb Cook's Planescape setting may predate the game, but it's only through the game that tangible form was given to a world that defies convention.

Like the setting, *Planescape: Torment*'s development also didn't play by typical rules. It was a side-project by a self-described B-team of developers at Black Isle Studios, many of whom had little experience in game development, little familiarity with the *Planescape* setting, and yet coalesced to create one of the greatest RPGs in PC gaming history. This is the story of how it came together.

BLACK SHEEP, BLACK ISLE

In 1997, Interplay Entertainment was fomenting a CRPG revolution. The prolific publisher was simultaneously overseeing development of *Fallout*, *Planescape: Torment* and *Baldur's Gate*. At the heart of this was Interplay producer Feargus Urquhart, who in 1996 founded Black Isle Studios and was also tasked with leading the RPG division at Interplay, ensuring that development was progressing smoothly across these projects.

But the beginnings of *Torment* were anything but smooth. "I was just trying to figure everything out, and I noticed that there were three *Planescape* projects that all had like four people on them," Urquhart recalls. This was a time when 3DFX cards were picking up momentum, and developers were swarming to create new 3D games using their own engines. One of these *Planescape* projects was to be such a game – a first-person 3D-accelerated dungeon crawler – while "almost no work was being done" on one of the other *Planescape* titles. Urquhart scrapped

WAYS TO PLAY

Planescape: Torment doesn't offer the traditional classes

STORY MODE (OPTIMAL)

Thief Class: WIS 18+, INT 15+, DEX 14+, CHA 13

Torment is a story-led game, and this type of build ensures that you get the maximum amount of exposition through dialogue options (via high Intelligence) and recollection of memories (via high Wisdom). The Thief class is best suited to this type of playthrough, as it unlocks the Stealth skill, which you can use to skirt around some of the more frustrating combat encounters in the game.

BRUTE MODE

Fighter Class: STR 16+, WIS 17+, CON 12+, CHA 12+

The Nameless One is, by default, a warrior, and if you find it too unbecoming to skulk around in the shadows, then boost those strength stats, pick up a two-handed hammer, and get swinging. High Strength is good for evil builds, as it unlocks intimidation-based dialogue options. High Wisdom is still recommended to get those all-important flashbacks that flesh out the story.

MAGIC MODE

Mage Class: INT 18+, WIS 17+, CHA 13

Learning the arcane arts in *Torment* is both challenging and rewarding. On the one hand, you need to rest to recharge spells, which isn't ideal because resting places can be quite scarce (especially once you leave Sigil). On the other hand, you'll be pouring points into Intelligence, which both unlocks dialogue options and strengthens spellcasting, so there's a nice synergy there.

A GROTESQUELY SCARRED DEAD-FLESHED MAN AFFLICTED WITH IMMORTALITY

ABOVE: The Modron Maze is a semi-randomised spoof of old-school dungeon crawling.

these disparate projects and rolled them into one.

"I said, 'OK, we need a game that we can go and actually just make without inventing new technology. We're going to use the *Baldur's Gate* engine, and differentiate ourselves by having a character who's not just going to be a generic character, and we're going to reinforce that by zooming in the camera.'"

This character was The Nameless One, a grotesquely scarred dead-fleshed man afflicted with immortality, which results in him losing his memory each time he is resurrected after meeting his death. His story wouldn't be one of toppling wayward gods or saving the land, but simply finding out who he is, piecing together clues as to his previous incarnations with the help of readable scars, Dodecahedron diaries, strange characters, and a host of companions that include a succubus committed to celibacy, a rugged redheaded fiendling, and a floating, wise-cracking skull called Morte. Sure, you could unleash an iron golem intent on destroying the multiverse in the name of entropy, or decide whether to let a vengeful angel live and continue his war on the heavens, but these matters were peripheral to your journey: finding out who you were in the past, while shaping who you are in the present through your actions and words. It's a story of identity, reconciliation and redemption, rather than idealised heroism.

Story and zoom level weren't the only ways in which *Torment* would distinguish itself from its fantasy cousin, *Baldur's Gate*. The fledgling team at Black Isle would push the Infinity Engine to its limit in the name of crafting its singular story and strange world.

Torment's lead programmer and lead artist, Dan Spitzley and Tim Donley, were just a couple of years into their careers when they were called up by Urquhart. With much of the studio's focus, and many of its key developers, on the never-to-be-completed *Stonekeep 2*, it was a case of giving those outside the flagship project something to stay busy with. "[Urquhart] just came one day and said 'We're going to do a *Planescape* game,' and in my head I'm going 'What the fuck is that?'" Donley tells me. "At the time it seemed so different, I was like 'Is this like steampunk or space, or science fiction?'"

Planescape was a D&D setting that didn't really have visual form at the time, and with Interplay management paying little attention to its development, *Torment* provided an opportunity for experimentation that other games weren't afforded. "Planescape was not a very well

known property," Spitzley begins. "Certainly it didn't have a bunch of games already, so there were a lot of things we could try to do that other teams might not have been inclined to."

There were people familiar with the Planescape setting at Interplay (including its co-creators David Cook and Colin McComb). *Torment*'s lead designer was also a fan, though he was a bit of a mystery to Black Isle developers at first. "Down the hall from me was this guy that would always just go into his office and close the door," Donley recalls. "You never really knew who he was. All we knew is he was working on *Descent to Undermountain*." This initially elusive man was Chris Avellone, *Torment*'s lead designer and creator of its now-seminal story.

Avellone (who was sadly unavailable for interview) outlined his design philosophy in the game's vision statement to Interplay management. Amid colourful digs at traditional fantasy ("Fireball spells can go hide in the fucking corner when you unleash your arsenal," "Forget fragile elves, rock-humping dwarves, worthless hobbits and with them, the mind-numbing boredom of every RPG ever released") his message to the development team was clear: "If you want to create something, don't use your first instinct. Stop for a moment, then put a spin on the idea."

Once he emerged from his bunker, Avellone was the driving force of the game. "Chris was great from the jump. When you'd say, 'I want to do this,' he would say, 'You tell me what it would take and then help me understand,'" says Donley. "That really set the stage for 'How can we get this done in the best way possible' versus 'this is just what you have to do'."

This openness to ideas and imperative to invert and subvert RPG tropes is felt in every alley, establishment, and dark corner of Sigil. Rats weren't just disposable early-game fodder, but part of Many-as-One, an intelligent rat hive mind living beneath the city. This rat collective is at war with the Dead Nations, a civilised society of undead contesting with the rat gestalt for the underground. It's a world in which angels are liars, devils are compelled to tell the truth, brothels are for satiating lusts of the mind rather than the body, and death was not a game-over-and-reload, but an endemic part of the journey.

RATS WEREN'T JUST DISPOSABLE EARLY-GAME FODDER, BUT PART OF A HIVE-MIND

This subversion translated to Sigil's architecture too, which shunned the medieval fantasy stylings that were ubiquitous in videogame RPGs up to that point. The city was unapologetically ugly, with buildings that resemble insect hives or rusty barricades from colossal conflicts. The few buildings that are familiar, like wooden shacks, are run-down and suffocated by the oppressive architecture; in fact, the most traditional-looking location, the Buried Village, was pushed beneath the ground by the Lady of Pain on a whim, and is now a half-buried hideout for miscreants.

In the same way that Urquhart gave unexpected opportunities to Spitzley and Donley, Donley in turn recruited untested developers to what he described (himself included) as the "Dirty Dozen" of Interplay at the time. Dennis Presnell, now lead environment artist on Obsidian's RPG *Avowed*, was brought onto this team of talented misfits. "I was a college dropout for all intents and purposes, and I'd always been very interested in digital art," he recalls. "Tim got me a cracked copy of Lightwave [the 3D animation software used for *Torment*], and I learned it just by pressing buttons and seeing what it did. I was terrible at the time, but I was given an extraordinary opportunity."

Another of Donley's discoveries was Eric Campanella, who designed and animated all party companions in the game. Starting out as a 2D artist with no track record in 3D modelling, Campanella asked Donley if he could try his hand at creating a character. Donley recalls the encounter: "I was like, 'Have you made a 3D model before?'" He's like, 'No, but I'd like to try.' And we just said, 'Knock yourself out'." Not knowing what to expect, Donley says: "It was like fucking Da Vinci," when he first went into Campanella's workshop. "The guy turned out to be one of the best 3D modellers I've ever seen. Back then characters were like less than 1,000, 500 polygons, but he just understood anatomy so well. Every one of the companion models was built in a day or less, except maybe The Nameless One."

ABOVE: The Mortuary marks the beginning and end of The Nameless One's elliptical journey.

INFINITY AND BEYOND

The amount of detail in the character models was just one of many ways in which Black Isle Studios "ran roughshod over some of the standards that BioWare had put in place for the engine, probably for good reason," as Spitzley put it.

BioWare was building the Infinity Engine concurrently at the same time as Black Isle was using it to make *Torment*. While there was plenty of cooperation between the two studios, there wasn't a lot of oversight, so the buccaneering team made *Torment* much by their own rules. "We were wide-eyed optimists, so we'd say, 'Well, why can't we have this big old wall of rotating, animating gears in our tile set?'" Dan Spitzley tells me. "We were able to animate the tiles themselves and then slap larger sprites – which a lot of those gears on the wall were – on top of that, but it all used external memory so we were lucky we didn't break the game."

This is how *Torment* ended up with animated backgrounds where molten metal would visibly ooze in the Foundry, or the great golem Coaxmetal would rotate and swing his hammer. To help Sigil feel even more alive, special crowd AI was programmed in. "In *Fallout* and *Baldur's Gate* you'd have NPCs just kind of milling around, but in *Torment* we really tried to make it feel more like this is a bustling city," Urquhart begins. "So we wrote in a whole thing to allow these crowd characters to walk around the maps. We had to create a whole different class of character so that the AI didn't bring the game to a halt." The Infinity Engine wasn't designed with any of this stuff in mind, but Black Isle knew no better and made it work with brute force.

Donley recalls one time when Black Isle went to BioWare's HQ in Edmonton, Canada, to show their progress on *Torment*. Within

NEW AND IMPROVED

How Torment broke the rule book

1 MOVING BACKGROUNDS
Breaking the Infinity Engine rule book at the time, Black Isle added animated elements to the backgrounds.

2 LOOKING ALIVE
Created by fledgling 3D animator Eric Campanella in around a day, each companion model was completely unique and brimming with animations.

3 TIME FOR YOUR CLOSE-UP
One of the first things Black Isle did to differentiate *Torment* from *Baldur's Gate* was zoom the camera in, creating a more intimate feel.

moments of arriving, BioWare CEO Ray Muzyka piled the Black Isle envoy and a couple of dozen BioWare developers into a conference room for the big *Torment* showcase. Spitzley loaded up the very beginning of the game, where The Nameless One rises off the slab in the Mortuary.

"It was almost 300 frames of animation, which was ridiculous for him getting off the slab and then walking around. There's a fade-in, The Nameless One gets off the slab, he starts walking around, and Ray is silent for a while," Donley remembers. "Then he turns to his programmer and goes, 'You guys told me we couldn't have that many frames of animation. How come the game looks so good?'"

The *Torment* team returned from Edmonton with BioWare's approval. Meanwhile, developers were regularly shuffled between the *Fallout* and *Torment* teams, which meant certain ideas would be coming back from *Fallout*'s development and being merged into *Torment*, such as chat bubbles above background NPCs' heads, and implementation of choices and consequences.

SEEDY VIBES

Planescape's soundscape was dark, atmospheric and adaptive. Where in the daytime you might hear the comforting simmer of food cooking on a stove, at night in that same place you'll hear rats scurrying around in the pipes. Sigil was alive with bespoke chatter in different areas. Even within a single area you'd shift through multiple zones with their own background ambience, giving Sigil the vibe of a seedy metropolis.

The instructions for sound designer Charles Deenen were much the same as for other departments: take an idea, and get weird with it. Deenen, who was working on multiple projects at Interplay, including *Fallout 2*, *Baldur's Gate* and *Descent to Undermountain*, saw *Planescape* as a bit of an escape from

MEET THE TEAM

Each companion has dialogue for multiple scenarios. Here are some of their most memorable lines:

MORTE
"Women were the reason I became a monk... and, uhh, the reason I switched back"

ANNAH
"Oh yeah, you trying to sit in my lap would make a grand tale... and a short one."

DAK'KON
"It is said that what a flawed man sees, his hands make broken."

FALL-FROM-GRACE
"Time is not your enemy, forever is."

IGNUS
"When the Planes burn and all life is but torches, then Ignus shall at last be at peace."

VHAILOR
"Nothing on all the Planes that can stay the hand of justice when it is brought against them."

NORDOM
"I think therefore I am... I think."

ABOVE: Hang out with a (sort of) civilised society of undead in the Dead Nations.

the more rigid requirements of other games. "There was never any true overshadowing direction on *Planescape*," Deenen tells me. "It was never like, 'You have to do this or that,' because nobody knew. We were inventing the sound of a new world. There were no boundaries on me, and I wasn't imposing boundaries on others unless they went completely off the rails."

Many of the game's sounds were re-pitched and distorted versions of something else entirely. The sound of strange crickets at night was in fact camels pitched down to deep levels, while glass vases would be used for unearthly ambient vocals. One of the designers even used the cries of their teething infant for the haunting soundscape of the Mortuary; using the sounds of a baby for a place pervaded by death – yet also endless rebirth for The Nameless One – was eerily appropriate.

Like he did for many other games, Deenen used Barbara Harris' walla group for *Torment*, a company that has provided background crowd sounds for hundreds of Hollywood movies, games and TV shows. For *Baldur's Gate*, the group provided the ambience for medieval markets and bustling taverns, but in *Torment* their work extended into far weirder realms. "It would be like, 'OK, now you're the Pillar of Skulls,' and half of them wouldn't even be doing vocals, they'd just be making these weird noises," Deenen recalls. "We'd have them walk around with microphones in a big room and we would use that to create these lively ambiences." Layered with Mark Morgan's reverberating, ethereal soundtrack, *Torment* sounded every bit like the world-between-worlds that it was.

SIGIL WAS ALIVE WITH BESPOKE CHATTER IN DIFFERENT AREAS

Beyond being cited as an inspiration for many games – from *Dragon Age: Origins* to *Disco Elysium* – *Torment*'s influence is wide-reaching. *Dark Souls* may have spawned an entire genre of games that integrate death into the design and narrative, but *Torment* had introduced this idea over 20 years earlier. Party companions today are almost a given in a certain style of RPG, but, "*Torment* really showed what you could do with companions," says Urquhart. "You had companions in *Fallout*, *Fallout 2* and *Baldur's Gate* for that matter, but they had no real dialogue. *Torment* was the first game that made them feel like fully functional parts of the story."

Urquhart went on to found Obsidian Entertainment, taking many of *Torment* and Black Isle's developers with him, where that untethered creative spirit still drives their games to this day. "Given *Torment*'s setting, there was an enormous amount of freedom there," Presnell, now an environment artist at Obsidian, tells me. "I have a similar philosophy in the way that I work now at Obsidian. Never do what's expected. I really encourage people on my team to have a strong vision for whatever it is that they do and not have fear about exploring interesting ideas."

Planescape was never too far from Obsidian's thoughts, and Urquhart was interested in working with the IP until InXile Entertainment began a Kickstarter campaign for *Torment: Tides of Numenera* in 2013. "I think that kind of closed the door for us," he says, before revealing who he'd really like to see work with the IP. "Chris Avellone was just so attached to *Torment* and about how he made it. It wouldn't be something we would make, but I think it would be awesome to see Chris take another stab at *Torment*."

Whatever the future holds, *Planescape: Torment* was the creation of a team that, almost by chance, found itself with immense freedom to visualise and realise a game that compels endless discussions to this day. 25 years on – aeons in gaming terms – The Nameless One still remains immortal, whether he likes or not. ■

Sigil remains one of the most architecturally distinct cities in gaming.

TALES *from the* DESERT

As **BLACK DESERT ONLINE** celebrates its tenth anniversary, we speak to the community about its adventures in Pearl Abyss' MMO

By Rick Lane

Beynac-et-Cazenac is a medieval village wrapped around a limestone cliff in the south-east of France's Dordogne valley. Perched atop the cliff-face is the Château de Beynac, an imposing fortress built by the barons of Beynac in the 12th century, featured in films such as Ridley Scott's The Last Duel. Beneath the castle, the surrounding village hugs the hillside tightly, its narrow buildings connected by twisting streets so steep they threaten to tip you into the river 300 metres below.

Here, hundreds of *Black Desert* players have gathered to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the popular Korean MMO. Beynac is the inspiration for *Black Desert*'s in-game city of Heidel, and as such makes an ideal venue for the occasion. For one cloudy Saturday in summer, reality and fiction collide. The castle is adorned with *Black Desert* banners, while the village's precipitous streets have been temporarily redubbed 'the adventurer's path'.

It's on this path where I spend much of the day, speaking to the players, guildmasters, streamers and cosplayers about their experiences in *Black Desert*. Across the day, I hear stories of epic wars, murderous outlaws, record breakers, virtual meet-cutes, and a small dog who became the symbol of a nation.

THE COSPLAYERS (AND BOYFRIENDS)

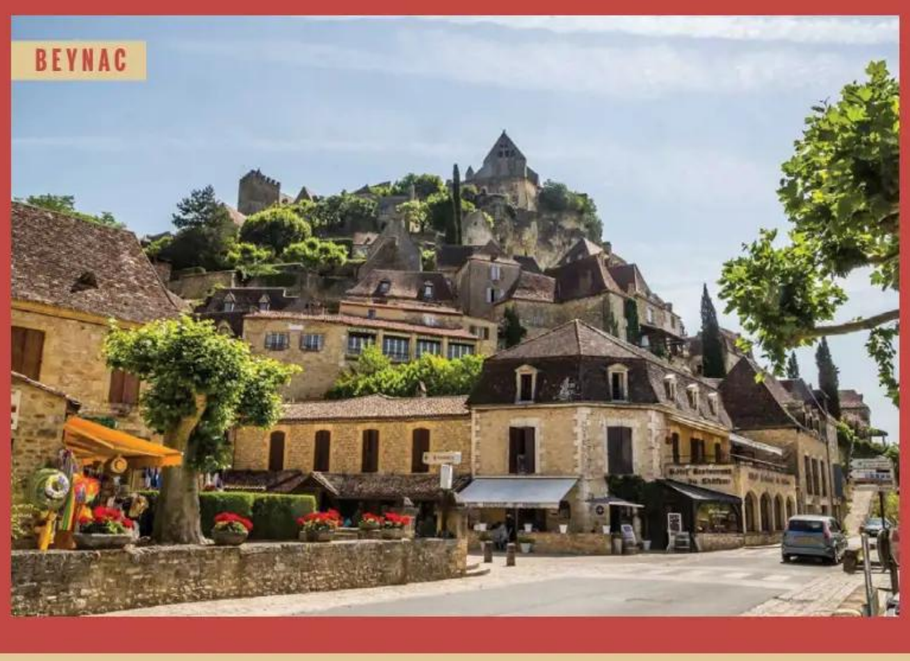
The day starts, somewhat unceremoniously, in a car park at the foot of Beynac. As everyone signs in for the event, I spot two reserved-looking guys sat on a wall near the riverbank, away from the larger crowd, and went over to chat. They introduced themselves as Lotus and Setheal. Lotus has been playing *Black Desert* for two months, Setheal for nearly a decade. In fact, Setheal has been playing since before the game was available in the West, joining a Korean server via VPN. "It was not really allowed," he says. "The first thing I saw was actually a leak from the game in 2013, and I was like, 'That's the best-looking MMO I have ever seen,' and that's why I joined the Korean server first."

I ask Setheal what his favourite memory from the game is. "Probably the fact that I met my girlfriend thanks to *Black Desert*." Both Setheal and Lotus, it turns out, are partners with two of the event's professional cosplayers – DrawMeACosplay, and Kazy. They introduce me. Kazy, like Setheal, is a long-time *Black Desert* player. "I saw the game before it even came out, like in 2014," she says. "I think I downloaded the Korean server when it was in alpha and managed to play a little bit." Kazy says she was drawn to the game by its horse-breeding life skill, which lets players pursue a life of raising and training horses. Her cosplay for the event is of the Black Knight class's Rosa Cassius armour, which she made in 2017.

Photo credit: Artyom Galahov and Jesse Huijser

WISH YOU WERE HERE *Real-life inspiration*

Beynac, the setting for *Black Desert*'s tenth anniversary event, is also the inspiration for the game's in-game city of Heidel. Below, you can see the similarities between the two.



ABOVE: The Château de Beynac was constructed in the 12th century by the barons of Beynac.

BOTTOM LEFT: The event's cosplayers pose in their armour at the foot of Beynac village, the designs based on various class outfits from *Black Desert Online*.

DrawMeACosplay, meanwhile, was drawn into *Black Desert* by Setheal, after they met via a mutual friend. In the game, she specialises in collecting herbs. "Every time I find a new rare one, I'm pretty happy about that," she says. "I remember waiting hours to collect one that just pops in the morning. Just waiting for it to pop."

While DrawMeACosplay met Setheal online, they largely play individually. "I like to do my own thing because I'm really a casual player," she says. They both work together on the cosplays, however. The costume she's wearing at the event – the Ranger class – took 18 months to complete. "I wanted to find challenging costumes, because I see all the details on that and I knew I was probably going to learn so many skills because of that costume."

PRODIGAL PVP PLAYERS

Trekking up the streets of Beynac, I come to a raised dais with a stone bench, where I take a short rest. A group of players are descending from the castle, and a voice calls out, "You're almost halfway!"

This turns out to be Blue Squadron, a streamer and content creator for *Black Desert*. A player for eight years, Blue Squadron formerly ran a PvP guild. Blue Squadron is visiting Beynac with his friend and former guildmate Layfonda, who tells me his favourite memories of the game are the "old-school PvP days" running with the Guild. "You would have like 30v30 people, 40v40 people. And it's just a ball fight, it's just a mess. You don't know what's happening. You just have Blue Squadron going, 'Guys come on, push up to the frontlines!'"

He stopped running his PvP guild because managing it could be like a full-time job

As the pair are talking, I get the sense they both feel the PvP element of *Black Desert* isn't what it used to be. Certainly, Pearl Abyss has changed how PvP works over the years, changing guild wars so that they only happen if both sides declare it, and increasing the amount of time solo players can grind in instanced zones, making it harder for PvP players to find people to fight.

Blue Squadron says he stopped running his PvP guild because managing it could be like a full-time job. "HR issues are a big deal," he says. "Making sure the community is active, people have a voice. People are talking, people are happy, right? Like, if you have a bad fight, you have to worry about the morale of the guild." Blue Squadron now runs a more general PvX guild, as well as running his channel.

Layfonda, meanwhile, is more critical of how *Black Desert* has altered the status of PvP in the game over the years. "There's more people, but because of more people, a lot of them don't like the PvP aspect," he says. "So it's taking the approach of the more casual gamer." He says the game is still a "blast to play", but clearly misses the days when PvP was less regimented and more of a free-for-all.

Later on in the day, during the event's livestreamed keynote, Pearl Abyss announces a new suite of separate, dedicated hardcore PvP servers, where players start at level 60 with preset gear, are completely free to fight one another, and have to fight their way out of a prison when killed. After the keynote, I catch up with Layfonda for his take on these new servers. "Very good. Very good," he says. "Again, I've been playing since the start of *BDO*, and what

LEFT: Announced at the event, Dosa is the latest of 28 classes playable in *Black Desert Online*.

RIGHT: *Black Desert Online* made its name through its real-time combat.

CLASS ACT

Black Desert has a whopping 28 classes

SAGE
The Sage has the ability to manipulate space and, at higher levels, time. He's able to alter his psychical form to evade enemy attacks.

CORSAIR
A Corsair can transform into a mermaid and unleash some devastating tidal wave attacks on her opponents.

SCHOLAR
Far from a retiring bookworm, the scholar can harness the power of gravity to unleash attacks using her twin hammers.

HASHASHIN
The Hashashin can manipulate the Desert's sands, conjuring huge dust devils that batter foes into submission.

they mentioned there was the prime-time *BDO*, where I loved it. It's going to be phenomenal."

THE EMBLEM OF THE DOG

As the village of Beynac falls away and the castle walls rear up alongside me, I encounter another group of PvP players, who all belong to a guild called Barcode. With an alliance of 150 players, Barcode specialises in "endgame" PvP, specifically "node wars" and siege wars. The former see guilds fighting over individual points on a map, whereas the latter involve capturing multiple nodes to occupy entire in-game continents, known as territories.

Among the Barcode group are husband and wife duo Thail and Blacksoul, the latter of whom relates an anecdote from their time playing *Black Desert*. "There was one time when we both, the guild we were in, won one of the territories."

Now, a fun mechanical quirk of *Black Desert* is that, if a guild wins a territory, they can change the emblems within that territory, flags, tents, walls, to anything they like. At the time, Blacksoul and Thail had a dog named Tuff. "We put a picture of our dog as the emblem, and then all the guards in the town had the picture of our dog's name." The picture also happened to depict Tuff wearing a crown, a fitting embodiment of the guild's triumph. Tuff, sadly, has since passed away. But let the record state that, once upon a time, he symbolised victory for an entire continent.

THE RED PLAYER

"I'm very involved with other players, whether they want to or not." This sinister phrase is uttered by Trisiplays, who I encounter across the bridge from the castle gatehouse. Trisiplays is a 'red' player, who deliberately plays *Black Desert* with a negative karma rating.

Karma is a system designed to regulate player behaviour in *Black Desert*. Actions like getting caught stealing from NPCs or killing other Adventurers can impact a player's karma rating. "Once you have negative karma, you become a red player," Trisiplays explains. Not only can red players be freely attacked by other adventurers, they're also attacked on sight by city guards, and lose more combat XP than normal on death.

Trisiplays describes to me the day on which he, as he puts it "went red". It happened during a guild war that broke out between two guilds over a disagreement about a particular spot for experience grinding. "My guild leader at the time tasked me to target their protected members," Trisiplays explains. "You can protect members from guild wars so they can't get attacked without a penalty. But I was open to take those penalties to take those targets out."

Each life skill is designed to keep players occupied for countless hours

The way Trisiplays explains it, the opposing guild's PvP players were "literally" hiding behind their protected players. "I didn't like that, so I was, 'How do you say, balls to the wall?' I [ran] up, killed them all, and I was like, 'Well, that's my life now'."

In fighting for his guild, Trisiplays cursed himself to a life in exile. He's been a red player since 2017. But he says he still tries to play in an honourable fashion. "I actually don't attack if somebody doesn't attack me first. I used to be much more aggressive, but I toned it down."

Indeed, Trisiplays is fascinated by how other players respond to his red status. "It has a lot of potential for honour, right, because if somebody treats you well, even though they could just kill you and destroy your stuff, and they don't do it, it really shows the character of the person you're interacting with," he explains. "Some people challenge me to a duel as well. They're like, 'I'm not going to attack you in a safe zone, but you have to fight me outside of town.' So very respectful."

Nonetheless, playing with a red name is significantly more challenging than playing the game regularly. Trisiplays must often resort to elaborate trickery simply to get around. "I definitely walk a lot on the roofs, because down in the streets is just not a thing," he says.

THE LIFE SKILLS MASTER

Black Desert is known for its spectacular combat, but it also lets players pursue a more peaceful virtual existence through its life skills. Life skills are in-game pursuits that would be considered side activities in most games, such as fishing, hunting, alchemy, gathering herbs and so forth. But

LEFT: Players pursue non-combat life skills, including farming, sailing, and alchemy.

RIGHT: It was always a good-looking game, but it has also advanced massively since it released.

Photo credit: Artyom Galahov and Jesse Huijser

ABOVE: Lucy (aka Kazy) with her boyfriend George (aka Lotus) and friend and fellow cosplayer Rhian.

LEFT: The castle keep is where the event's keynote was held, and marks the end of the adventurer's path.

each of these has its own levelling system that lets them become a player's entire focus if they so choose.

Each life skill is designed to keep players occupied for countless hours, but that hasn't stopped one player from trying to master all of them. Enter BairogHaan, a streamer and Twitch Partner who has been playing *Black Desert* since its inception. "Basically, my goal in the game is to get a high level life-skilling in many different life skills."

Of the ten available life skills in the game, BairogHaan currently has reached the max level of 50 in five of them, a process which has taken him most of the time he's been playing. He says that his favourite life skill to play was initially gathering "for the first three, four years of *BDO*". But this has since changed to hunting "because hunting is much more profitable at the moment".

Even with half of *Black Desert*'s skills at level 50, the challenge ahead of BairogHaan is steep. As he points out, there are some life skills that basically cannot be maxed out. One example is sailing. "Sailing is one of the hardest life skills to level up. It takes literally a hundred years to level up to max level." In addition, developer Pearl Abyss recently updated the max level for life skills to 100. "So I can go further, but currently, the goal is to get to 50."

I ask BairogHaan what it is about *Black Desert*'s life skills that intrigue him so much: "It's part of my daily routine. Time where I can just chill and focus on getting the goals." Also, while the destination may be unreachable, the journey has amassed BairogHaan quite the following. BairogHaan has built a Twitch account with 20,000 followers. "I know a lot about life-skilling, so they come to

ask questions, what is good, what is bad and so on, so I try to teach and help other people."

THE RECORD BREAKER

Late afternoon in Beynac, it starts to rain hard, and many attendees take shelter in a building adjacent to the castle gatehouse, where drinks are being served. As I wander around, I'm gently told by a player that I overlooked him earlier in the day, and that he has a story to tell.

That player is RisingSun, aka PvEnvironment. "I'm currently the highest player on combat level in Europe," he tells me. It's a record he has set several times, becoming the first player in Europe to reach levels 66, 67 and 68 for combat in *Black Desert*.

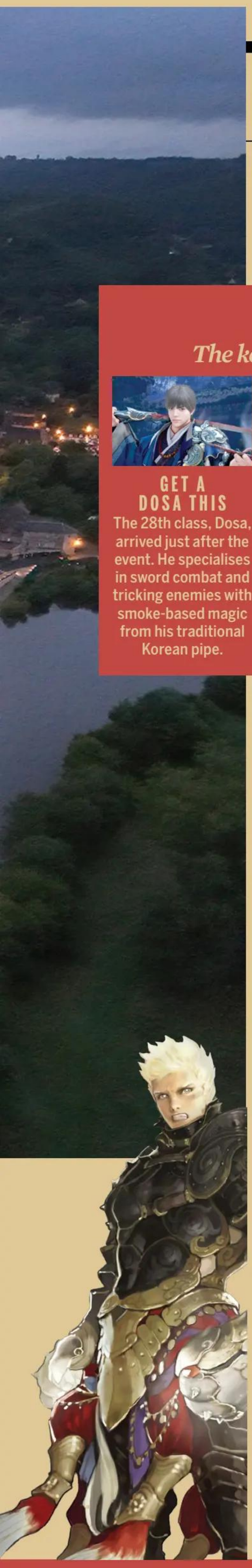
To reach such a level in Pearl Abyss' MMO requires an enormous amount of grinding. Levelling up from 66 to 67, for example, took PvEnvironment an entire year. "A lot of people ask me how you can grind more than two hours a day," says PvEnvironment, who works in computer science by day. "For me it's relaxing. I love grinding, so it's relaxing for me."

For PvEnvironment, grinding in *Black Desert* is a fundamental part of his daily routine. It's also netted him a small Twitch following, with 4,000 people tuning in to watch him push his combat level ever higher. But that

ABOVE: Modern Beynac's population is somewhere between 500 and 600 people.

RIGHT: After a long day wandering up and down Beynac's streets, attendees gather in the castle for an evening meal.

Photo credit: Artyom Galahov and Jesse Huijser



BALL POINTS

The key announcements from Heidel Ball 2024

GET A DOSA THIS
The 28th class, Dosa, arrived just after the event. He specialises in sword combat and tricking enemies with smoke-based magic from his traditional Korean pipe.

SEOUL MUSIC
The second part of *Black Desert*'s *Land of the Morning Light* expansion adds the city of Seoul. Seoul brings with it new quests, events, and concludes the expansion's story.

MAP FILLER
Two new regions were unveiled to follow *Land of the Morning Light*: Seoul, called Mountain of Dawn Break, and a castle-themed dungeon called the Demon Land.

BACK FOR THE FUTURE
Pearl Abyss plans to explore the history of the world it created. Players will be sent years into the past, where the worlds of *Black Desert* looked very different.

routine was upset last year, when he was unexpectedly banned from the game. The ban was allegedly for macro use, which is a bannable offence in *BDO*. "There was a banwave," he says. "They didn't explain it in detail, but we think it was the anti-cheat program," he says.

PvEnvironment livestreamed about his ban, and says the stream resulted in a flurry of news stories across specialist media, such as the German site MeinMMO. After 28 days, the ban was lifted. Despite this, PvEnvironment is clearly still bothered by the ban. "I got a lot of support. But I needed, I think, three months to be a normal player again." Throughout the duration of the ban, he struggled to focus on his work. He tried playing *Black Desert* with a new account, but he says he couldn't escape the spectre of the ban. People who recognised him from social media would accuse him of being a cheater, while some would try to be reassuring, saying it was "nice that you are still trying". "It was amazing, but at the same time heartbreaking," he says.

PvEnvironment says he never found out what caused the initial ban, nor what spurred Pearl Abyss to lift it. He says there was no acknowledgement that an error had been made, despite many players as well as him having their bans lifted. "There was no refund or something for the time [I] missed playing. But at least I was happy to play again."

After the event, I contacted Pearl Abyss to ask what the developer's policies are regarding player bans in *Black Desert* for using macros, whether there was a wave of erroneous bans last year, and its policy regarding bans that are issued by mistake. On the subject of banning players for macros, Pearl Abyss states, "Yes. We regularly (permanently) ban accounts that use unauthorised programs and macros. For accounts that are suspected of usage of unauthorised programs and macros, we first apply temporary bans while we perform investigations."

Regarding the alleged wave of erroneous bans, Pearl Abyss quotes from a report on an investigation the company conducted last year, looking into restrictions on 'unauthorised program users', which "reconfirmed that there were no issues with the detection results of our 'unauthorised program and data tampering detection system'". However, Pearl Abyss "discovered the possibility that our strengthened restriction criteria included outlier cases unrelated to *Black Desert*, such as PCs infected by viruses, malicious code, or certain 'PC management programs,' which could affect the detection systems". Taking these variables into account, the company "determined that imposing restrictions on accounts without major abnormalities in their in-game records would be unjust and made the decision to lift the restrictions on these accounts".

As for the policy on bans handed out by mistake, Pearl Abyss referred players to Article 16 of its terms of service, adding, "Not every case is completely black and white, so we handle detections of cheating on a case-by-case basis. In the case of such players affected by the banwave, we maintained active communication with them all throughout their ban appeal process, and addressed any issues individually with them as best we could."

Since the reinstatement of his account, PvEnvironment has continued to pursue new combat levels, pushing to level 68 and building his Twitch following. "I learned about so many people who [also] have goals like me," he says. "South America, North America. It was amazing to find these people and we are all kind of friends now." He's also part of *Black Desert*'s Ambassador program, through which experienced players share their knowledge of the game with newcomers. "It's normal players, but they like to help new adventurers," he says. "It's a nice community. I really like it."

PvEnvironment says he never found out what caused the initial ban

As night falls, everyone gathers together for dinner, after which a prize draw is held for the community members. For most of the day, I've encountered *Black Desert*'s community as individuals or in small groups, hearing their experiences in the game as disparate, isolated tales. Here though, the passion of the community as a unit becomes clear. As each winner is called forth, the front of the room (where most are sat) explodes with cheering and roaring, entire tables of community members often leaping from their seats. With fans like this, it's clear why *Black Desert* has thrived for ten years, and why its creators are confident it'll be around for ten more. ■

LEFT: Naturally, the game also included fishing and cooking.

RIGHT: The recent, Land of the Morning Light expansion delves heavily into the game's Korean heritage.

YOU PLAY AS A YOUNG
WITCH AIMING TO BE
AN APPRENTICE, WHO
GETS BOOTED OFF
A MOUNTAIN

PC GAMER

15 BEST MAIL DELIVERY GAMES ON PC

By Dainelle Lucas

RELEASED Jan 22, 2025 DEVELOPER Chibig, Nukefist

Mika and The Witch's Mountain

This way up

1 **Delivering packages isn't a glamorous job, but it is an essential one, helping thousands of people get their much needed equipment, knick-knacks and, uh, fish bowls, in a timely fashion. Luckily for Mika she gets to do it on a broom rather than a van.**

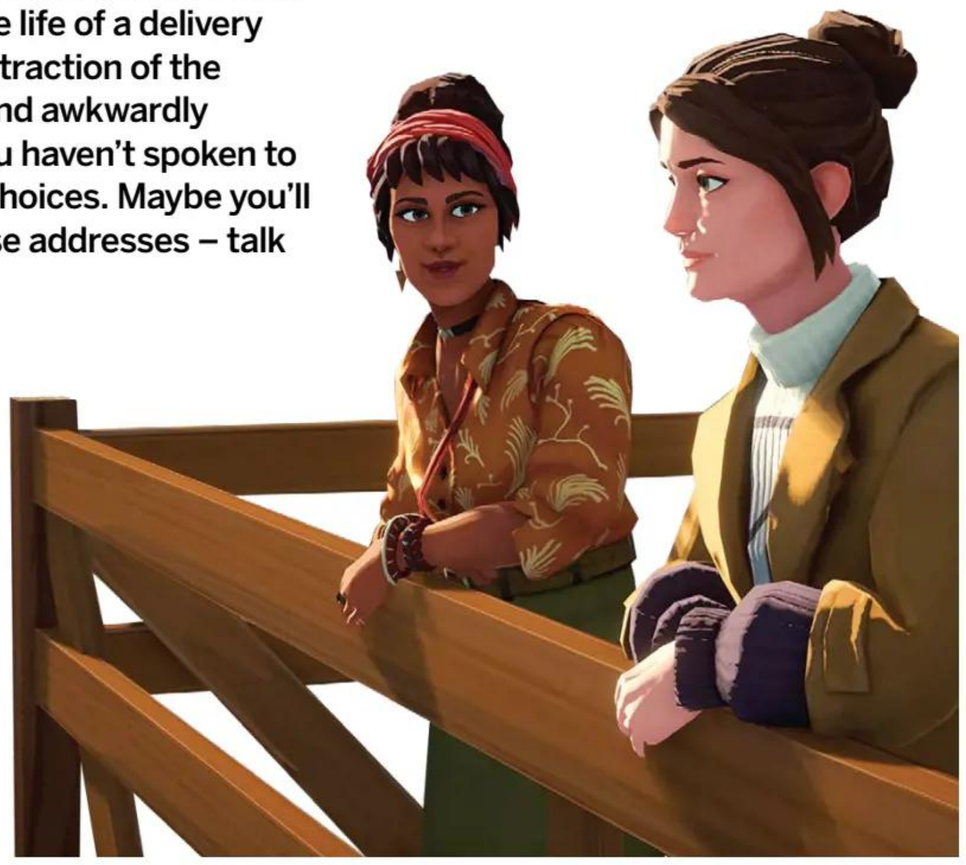
You play as a young witch aiming to be an apprentice, who gets booted off a mountain and told to work her way back up it on her own two feet. To do that she'll need to get a job and earn enough to fix and upgrade her broom. Handily the post office is in need of a new delivery person so Mika takes on the job and starts handing out packages while getting to know everyone in a town full of eccentrics. You'll need to deliver important items, and not-so-important ice creams before they melt. Being a post witch is harder than it looks, though.

RELEASED Sep 1, 2021 DEVELOPER Gamious

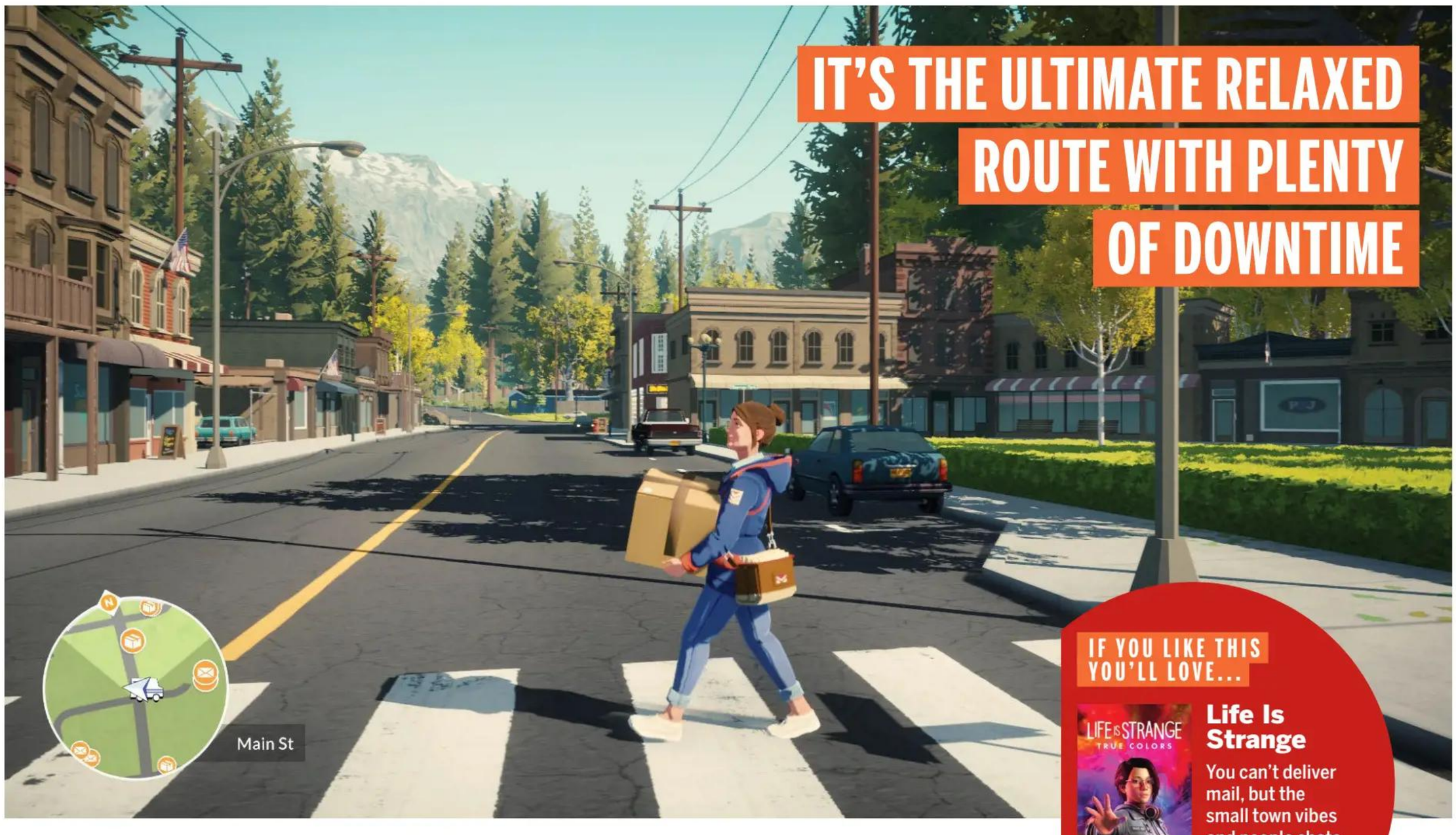
Lake

Handle with care

2 **Ever wondered what returning to a simpler, more rural life would be like? City hot shot Meredith gets to experience just that as she goes back to her hometown to step in for her father as a mail carrier for two weeks. Set in the 1980s, *Lake* lets you experience the life of a delivery person at a gentle pace without the distraction of the internet. You'll get to know the locals and awkwardly rekindle old friendships with people you haven't spoken to in decades through in depth dialogue choices. Maybe you'll even find romance alongside all of those addresses – talk about a good work-life balance!**



It's the ultimate relaxed route with plenty of downtime – none of this modern insanely high Amazon quotas business to contend with. Just you, your van, and the smell of envelopes. Perhaps you'll even be tempted to stay on instead of returning to the city. We couldn't blame you, who wouldn't love a life of packages and lake views? You even get a nice little uniform to wear. This definitely gets our stamp of approval.



DEVELOPER Scott Malthouse

Quill

Lett'er have it

3 This one requires you to actually get a pen and paper out to draft your letters. Available for free on itch.io you set up a character who needs to write letters to leave the strongest impression on the recipient, but doing so is harder than it looks. You'll have an ink pot of words as prompts that you'll roll dice to use inferior or superior versions of, and get scored at the end of each paragraph. Your final score determines how your letter is received and if you're successful and delivering your missive.

IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU'LL LOVE...

Life Is Strange

You can't deliver mail, but the small town vibes and people chats make up for it.

RELEASED Apr 23, 2020 DEVELOPER ION Lands

Cloudpunk

Air mail

4 If you're going to deliver post you might as well look cool doing it. Exploring the cyberpunk city of Nivalis as a delivery driver in your own spaceship, you're responsible for getting things where they need to go – be that the dark streets of the lower layers, or the tops of spires above. You'll learn a lot about the city on your rounds as you take care of legal and not-so-legal drop offs.

RELEASED Apr 1, 2021 DEVELOPER Infogrames

Totally Reliable Delivery

Postage guaranteed

5 Ever found your package in a recycling bin on collection day, or watched one of those videos where a delivery driver just chucks something over a wall? They probably trained themselves on this. Rag-doll physics and a range of insane vehicles makes for a playground full of chaos where, hopefully, some of your customers will get their deliveries. It's stupid and messy fun.

RELEASED Oct 7, 2024 DEVELOPER Popcannibal

Kind Words 2

To whom it may concern

6 Being responsible for mail doesn't always mean that you have to be the one to deliver it, sometimes you need to be the one to produce it. The sequel to the small, but phenomenal *Kind Words*, this game adds more layers and opportunities to the letter writing process so you can send out your thoughts and feelings to thousands of like-minded individuals around the globe. It's like pen-palling, but without needing to lick any stamps. The game includes everything from *Kind Words 1* and even lets you still send letters between both games, but the sequel lets you wander around little dioramas and enter spaces for specific messages. You can look for recommendations in a shop, share poetry in a cafe or even scream your letters into a void for no one to see just for the catharsis of writing it all out. Letters arrive via paper aeroplane, and it gives you a chance to answer anything and broaden your horizons. You even get your own little writing desk.

DEVELOPER Kojima Productions

Death Stranding

Post traumatic stress

7 Even the apocalypse and horrifying black-goo monsters can't prevent this postman from finishing his route across a broken America. Sam is the ultimate postie, capable of delivering any package across any terrain thanks to his bottled baby companion. It beats a van's GPS.

Sure, it might be a particularly dangerous version of the job, but it must pay well with risks such as time-destroying weather, and the need to shift corpses. The health insurance is good too – get killed on the job? No problem, just swim back to your body and make your next delivery.

DEVELOPER CT Matthews

Ducky's Delivery Service

Flight risk

8 Even the smallest of parcels can brighten up your day, and so can the smallest of games. Here you play as a duck in a propeller hat who flies around and delivers mail as fast as he can. It's surprisingly intense as you have to dodge frequent obstacles such as stalactites, seagulls and ghosts when out on your rounds and deliver everything as fast as you can. It's a challenging little platformer that sees you cutting corners by chucking mail at letter boxes and hoping it lands correctly. Please don't become our mail carrier, Ducky.

IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU'LL LOVE...

Celeste

Much darker, but with a similar pixel art style as well as tight platforming and climbing to enjoy.

HERE YOU PLAY AS A DUCK IN A PROPELLER HAT WHO FLIES AROUND AND DELIVERS MAIL

RELEASED Aug 3, 2023 DEVELOPER Larian

Baldur's Gate III (act 3)

Addressing issues

9 You could argue that act 3 feels like a separate game as the city of Baldur's Gate is just so huge and completely different to what came before. You might not be able to deliver mail, but you can help keep the service running by assisting out some pigeons. And opening other people's mailboxes to search for quest info isn't considered stealing, so that makes you an unofficial postie.

RELEASED Oct 20, 2022 DEVELOPER Fractal Phase

Flying Neko delivery

Part and parcel

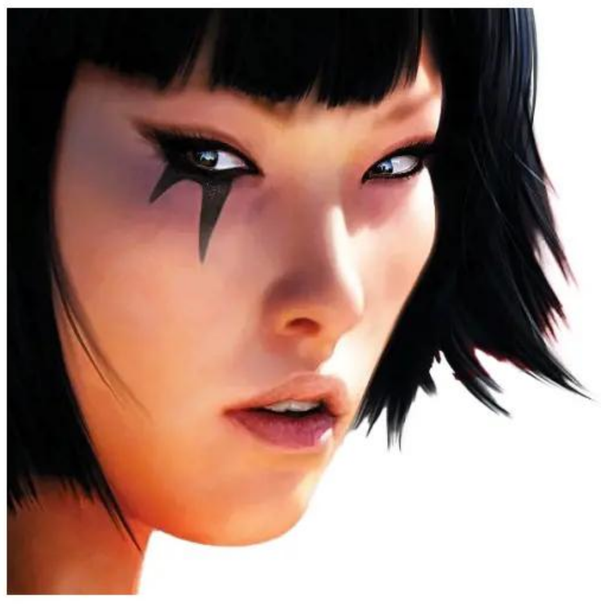
10 You don't need to be a human to take on the job of delivering post by flying broomstick, cats are just as capable of donning a pointy hat and taking to the skies. This is the second game on the list to fill that Kiki's Delivery Service-style game niche, but this one is much more freeform with more customisation and magic portals that open up new areas to explore.

DEVELOPER Dice

Mirror's Edge

Courier catastrophe

11 The oldest game on this list, and yet somehow it still holds its own thanks to its enduring style of courier delivery. Faith is a runner who effortlessly parkours around The City carrying important documents and data to their intended recipients without falling under too much surveillance. You'll need to be extremely fit and unbothered by heights if you want to take on one of these postal routes, as you'll need to weave your way across rooftops and through restricted areas, trusting in your own body to stick a landing rather than falling to the streets below.



RELEASED Aug 31, 2021 DEVELOPER Stonewheat & Sons

KeyWe

A package of joy

12 Mail isn't just about writing and delivering it, you also need to sort it at the post office and that's where Jeff and Debra come in. Two tiny kiwi birds in charge of managing where things need to go, and without an opposable thumb between them. You'll need to flap around several mail rooms to complete various tasks such as typing out telegrams or sorting letters under the watchful eye of your octopus manager. You can play on your own, but you're better off recruiting a friend to help control both birds and get the job done. It's part platformer, part puzzle as you have to leap to each workstation and figure out how to press all of the right buttons, usually with your bum.

You'll also need to contend with the ever changing weather and seasons adding hazards to the office such as sandstorms, floods and carnivorous plants that leave you wondering why you can't just close the windows. It all makes for an chaotic work environment.

RELEASED Apr 2, 2015 DEVELOPER Frontier Developments

Elite Dangerous

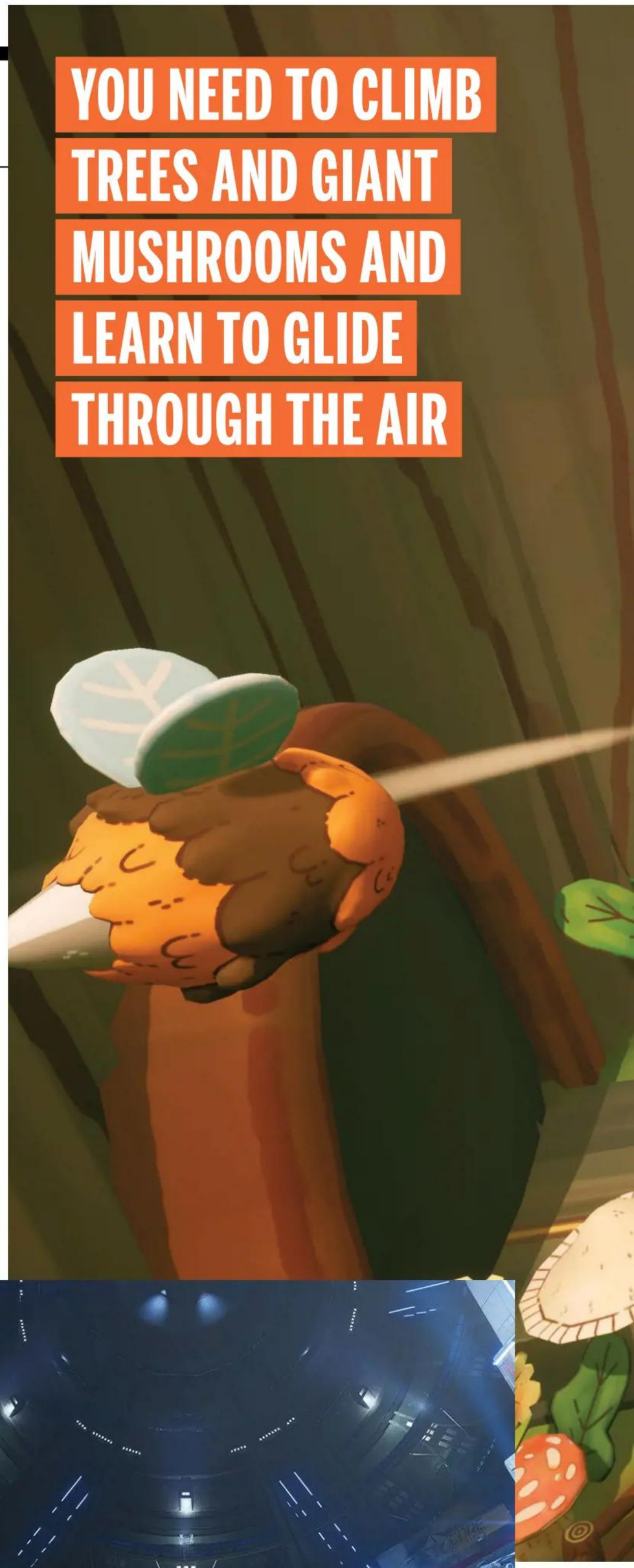
Long-haul delivery

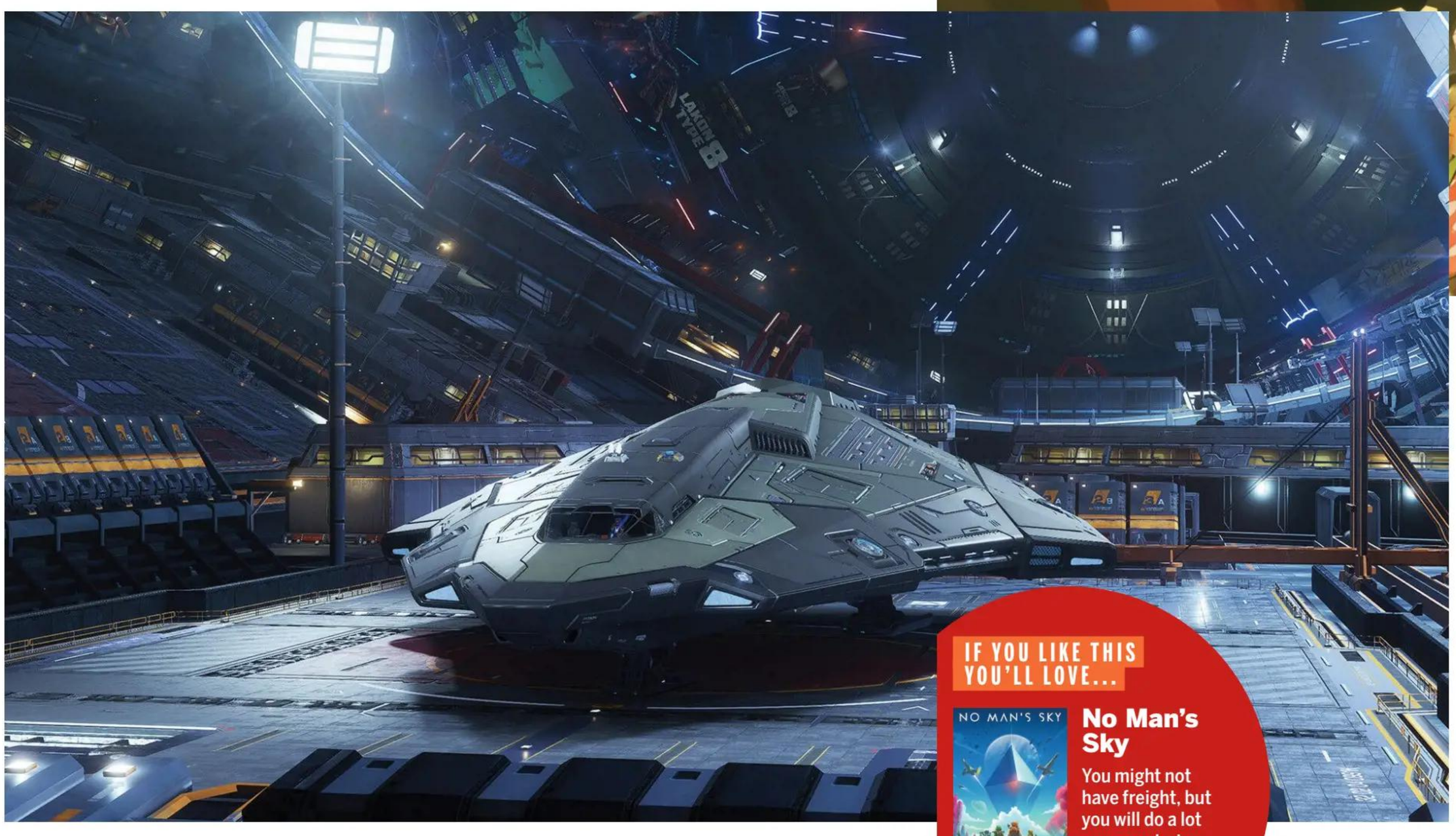
13

Delivering freight still counts as delivering mail, and a spaceship is basically a fancy van, so this is definitely a game about the postal service. Just a much less organised one and, you know, set in space.

Ship upkeep can be expensive and incredibly dangerous so the best way to deal with that is by first getting yourself a job running cargo across the milky way and praying you don't run into any ne'er-do-wells. Eventually you'll start scraping together enough money to upgrade your craft to fit in more lucrative deliveries and maybe even a defensive gun or two.

Other players are always out there hiding between the stars, waiting to snatch your goods like a dog attacking a newspaper the second it pokes through the letterbox. Sure, you could zoom off and go take part in some space battles, but there's a calming allure to being a space trucker and making sure your parcels arrive safely on the other side of the galaxy. *Elite Dangerous* definitely isn't the safest of mail-carrying careers, but if you persist it is one of the more lucrative ones. Just watch out for the aliens.





IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU'LL LOVE...

No Man's Sky

You might not have freight, but you will do a lot more exploring and crafting.

DEVELOPER Kela Van Der Dejil

Mail Time

Stamp of approval

14 Ever wanted to be an adorable little mushroom-person prancing around a forest? *Mail Time* lets you do just that, but you'll need a job to sustain all of that twee. You'll need to become a Mail Scout and deliver letters to other denizens of the forest such as birds and squirrels. Animals need their Amazon deliveries, too.

Your postal route is a tricky one though, you need to climb trees and giant mushrooms and learn to glide through the air with the help of an oversized envelope. Let's just hope no one's written 'Do not bend' on it.

RELEASED: May 29, 2018 DEVELOPER Villa Gorilla

Yoku's Island Express

First-class frolics

15 What better way is there to make sure a parcel reaches its destination than through the art of pinball? Sure, there may not be as much space as a Ford Transit, but it gets the job done and is great for bouncing your way through caves and forests. This lively island finally has a new postmaster, but you'll have a lot of work on your hands to return things to normal as the local deity has been attacked and the island is in chaos. You'll need to unite everyone and beat up some bosses to achieve the postal network of your dreams.

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

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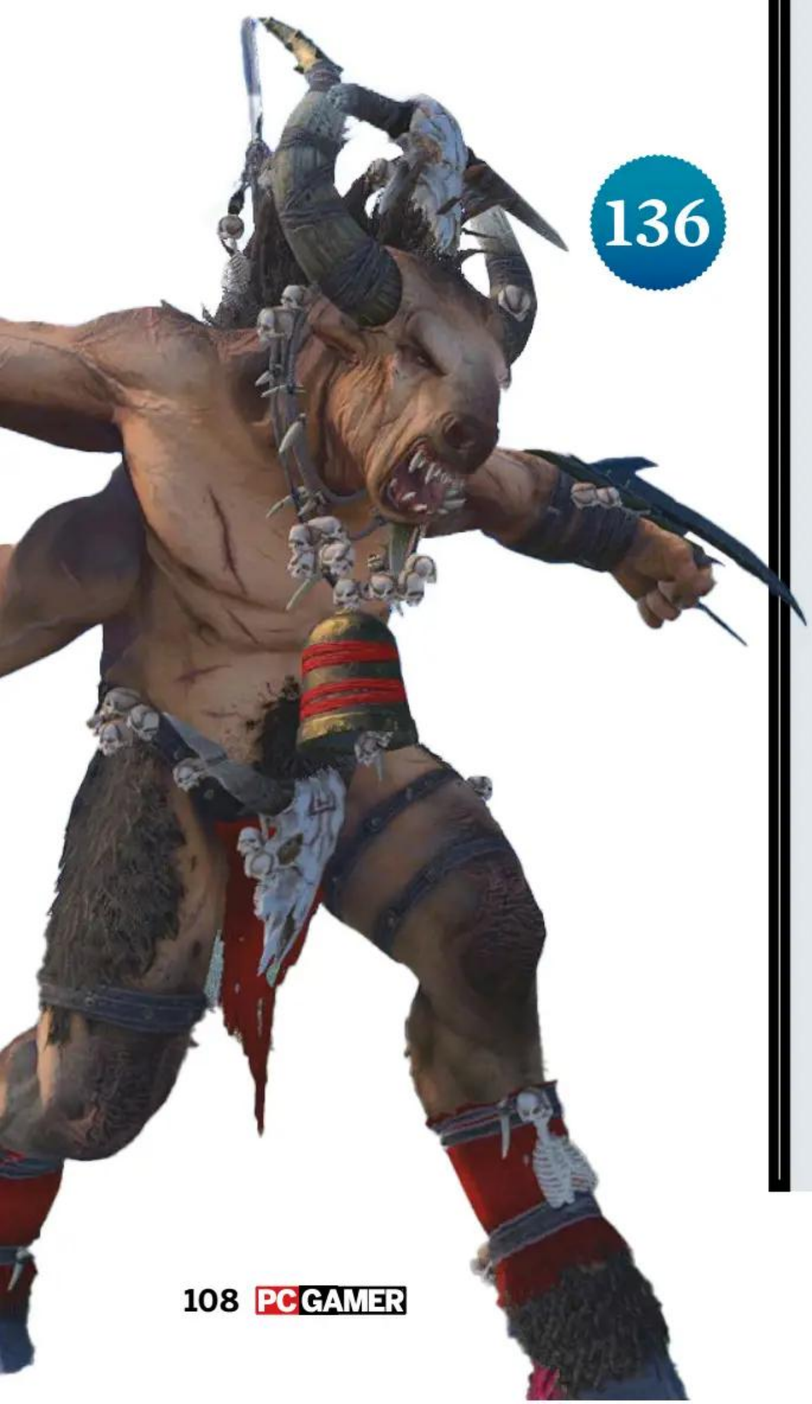

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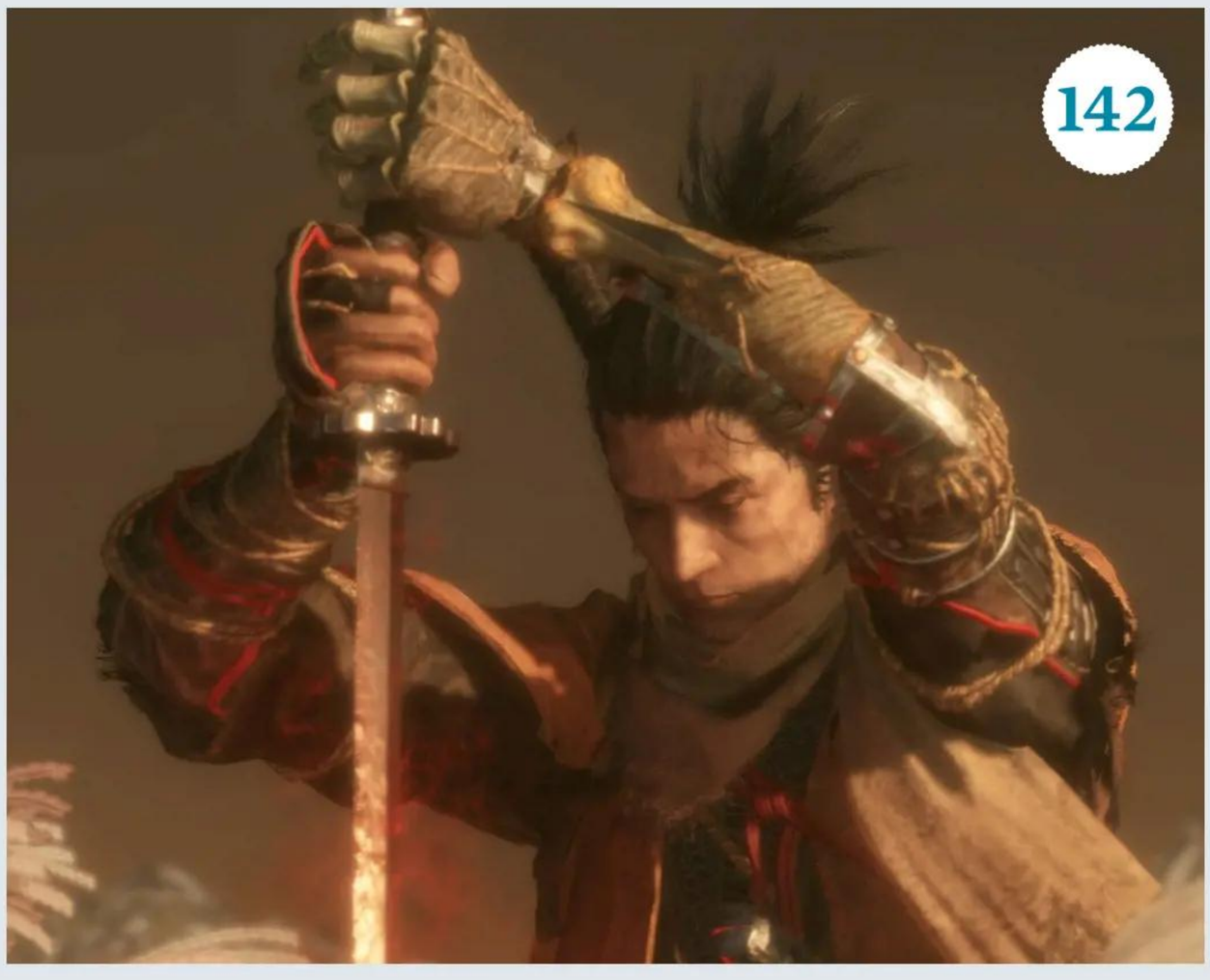
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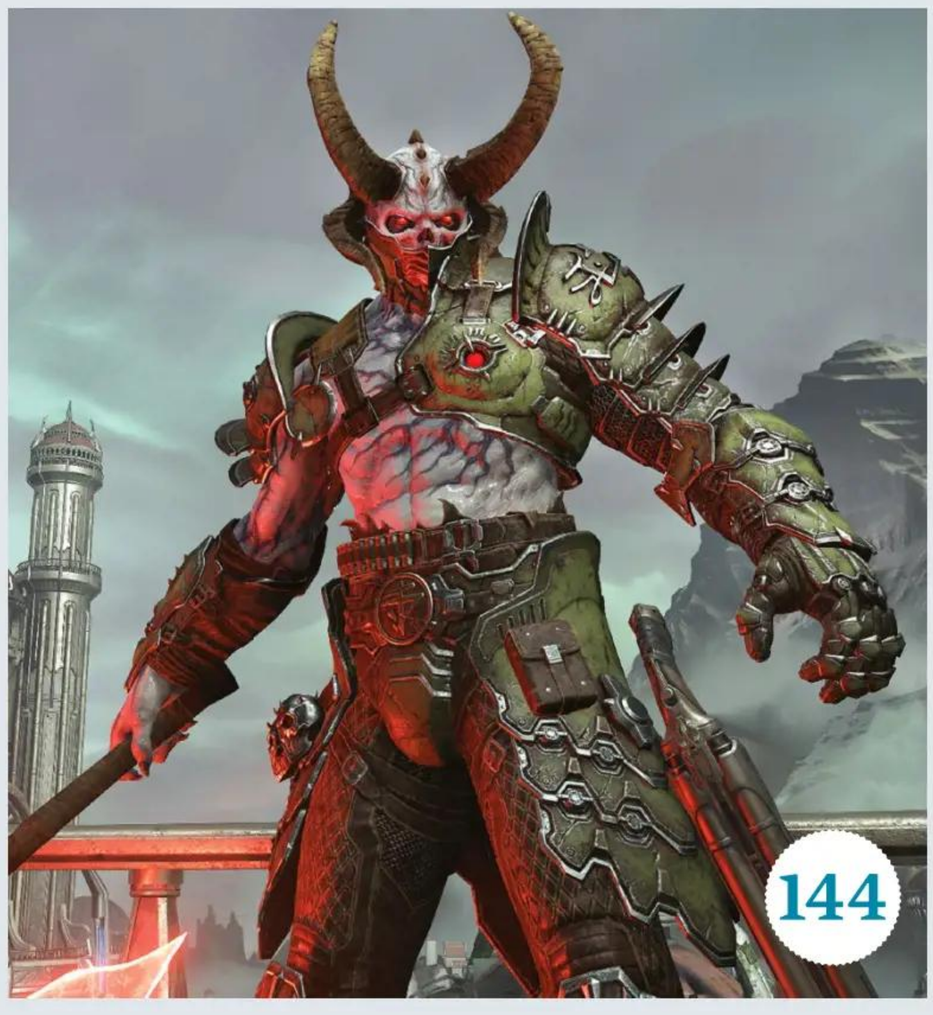
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GAINING VALUABLE WORK EXPERIENCE IN ALPHA PROTOCOL

PART 1

Even top secret intelligence operations offer internships. Well, they do if your uncle works in the back office. *By James Nouch*

Young people today have it tough, from climate breakdown to the skyrocketing price of once-egalitarian confectionary brands such as Freddo, Curly Wurly and even the humble Fudge. But for many, getting started on the career ladder will be their most pressing concern, and that's certainly the case for Mikey T.

Fortunately, our young hero is about to get a break, as he's just been accepted as the first ever intern at Alpha Protocol. Sure, the position may be unpaid, but the three-month placement will give Mikey a valuable insight into the inner workings of America's most secretive intelligence agency. How did he get the gig, you ask? Don't worry about it! It was a highly competitive and totally fair process, I can assure you. OK, so Mikey's uncle works as a back-office member of the Alpha Protocol support staff, but that's irrelevant. Who said it was nepotism? It's definitely not nepotism.

After all the excitement of landing the gig, it's fair to say that Mikey's first day gets off to a ropey start. Every *Alpha Protocol* campaign begins with your character waking up on a gurney in the agency's operations centre. Mikey, drugged and disoriented, wakes to the sound of a ringing phone. Answering it initiates a video call with Alpha Protocol intelligence analyst Mina Tang, and represents our first chance to engage in some networking.

It's at this point that you get your first taste of *Alpha Protocol*'s conversation system, which lets you select from three flavours of response to any given line of dialogue: professional, aggressive and suave. Now, I don't know about you, but 'suave' isn't the first adjective that comes to mind when I see a 19-year-old with a soul patch, so that feels like it's off the table. Aggressive doesn't fit the bill either – it's a rare breed of intern who manages to double as workplace bully. That leaves professional, which feels just right for an enthusiastic young go-getter like Mikey T.

In the conversation that follows, Mina explains that our drugging is part of an 'indoctrination' (oh, that's just fine then, is it?) and that a guard is en route to put us back to sleep via the medium of tranquillisers and/or fists. You'd think the professional response here would see us requesting an urgent meeting with HR, but instead we professionally use a fire extinguisher to smash our way out of the room and professionally choke out a patrolling guard. We go on to very professionally shoot no fewer than ten men with a tranquilliser gun before the tutorial mission comes to an end.

MEET THE TEAM

With all that unpleasantness behind us, Mikey T is keen to meet his new colleagues, and pathologically eager to make a good impression. First up, we head to the weapons range to finally meet Mina in the flesh. Desperate to develop some level of workplace rapport, we start thinking about conversational responses that move beyond the purely professional. Lucky for us, we have a special fourth set of dialogue options to choose from.

WE GO ON TO VERY PROFESSIONALLY SHOOT NO FEWER THAN TEN MEN

That's because I set Mikey T's background as 'recruit' as part of the character creation process, thinking it would accurately convey his utter lack of occupational experience or relevant training. I'm hoping that this choice will open up conversational alleys that better reflect Mikey's priorities (eg, "Do you know where the laminator sheets are kept?" or perhaps, "Would you consider giving me a recommendation on LinkedIn?") but most of them just seem to be variations on the theme of, "What does that acronym mean?" To make matters worse, the 'recruit' background also means that you start the game with no skill points to spend whatsoever, to reflect your status as a total dunderhead.

In spite of all this, Mikey's naïve charm soon advances our relationship with Mina from 'neutral' to 'liked'. If only it were this easy and this heavily signposted in real life. Alan Parker is our next appointment, and this greying veteran of the Alpha Protocol team seems to like the cut of our jib (because I correctly guessed he would like it if we kept saying professional things). He delivers our espionage training before we head to meet Sean Darcy for our final test: the gadget briefing.

It turns out that Sean Darcy is a spectacular arse. He's antagonistic, prone to jealousy and doesn't like to play by the rules. As a goodie-two-shoes on a mission to endear himself to every workplace contact he meets, this represents a serious challenge for Mikey T. We put in a strong performance on the training course – surely this will make Darcy change his tune. If by 'change his tune' you mean 'propose a wager that leads to you being attacked by wave after wave of vengeful guards from the tutorial mission', you'd be eerily correct. Still, Mikey takes the bet and only hospitalises a handful of guards. A partial success!

THE RULES

1. You're working for exposure. You can't spend any money.
2. Do things by the book. Interns don't get to break the rules.
3. Talk to everyone and be sure to make a good impression.

The consequences of your prior choices will ripple out in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

The last meeting on our whistle-stop tour of Alpha Protocol's headquarters is Yancy Westridge, the formidable chief of the agency's operations. He briefs us on our mission, berates us for being a rookie, and sends us on our way before we can get in so much as a "thank you for this opportunity, Mister Westridge sir". With that, it looks like we're heading to Saudi Arabia.

MAKING CONTACTS

Meet the Alpha Protocol team

YANCY WESTRIDGE
The head honcho, and also therefore the person that Mikey is most likely to get tongue-tied around. As such, he avoids Westridge.

MINA TANG
The first person you meet in the game, and the only one that seems to take issue with new hires being drugged and pummelled. She also lends Mikey a stapler.

SEAN DARCY
Mikey accidentally ate Sean's lunch on day one (a bean-heavy chilli) and hid the evidence. He lives in fear that Sean will discover this deception.

ALAN PARKER
Alan projects strong paternal vibes for Mikey. So much so that Mikey absent-mindedly called him dad during a briefing and blushed so hard.

ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

We're out on our first real mission, and there's a problem. Mikey keeps finding bag after bag of money. Our target is an international arms smuggler named Nasri, and it seems that he's so wealthy he leaves duffel bags of large denomination bills around his base in much the same way that I leave coffee mugs in every room of my house. Now, in an ordinary playthrough, this wouldn't pose a problem – after all, cash can be used to purchase better arms, armour, gadgets and intel to advance your missions.

But Mikey T isn't your ordinary agent. He's working at Alpha Protocol for exposure and he's terrified of breaking any regulations. I glumly add the bags to Mikey's inventory even though I know that the rules of the playthrough forbid us from ever spending the money. Perhaps Alpha Protocol HQ has a lost property department where we can hand all this in?

The cavalcade of thousand-dollar-duffels aren't our only problem, either. It turns out that Mikey is incredibly loud and conspicuous. He can't seem to make it five metres in this place without Nasri's guards spotting him, presumably wondering why the US government would send a teenaged klutz to infiltrate their reinforced munitions compound. To make matters worse, my handler for this mission is Westridge himself. This is not how you make a good impression with the big boss.

Through a combination of determination, luck, and less-than-professional levels of violence, we eventually make it to our target. Nasri's elite guards don't go down without a fight, but before I know it, I have the man himself at gunpoint.

The tension mounts as I consider the options available to me. Westridge seems to think that killing Nasri is a good way to hinder the flow of illegal weapons and may help protect innocent people. Executing a suspect in cold blood is definitely not very intern-like, though, so I'm keen to hear other options. Nasri is next to pop up with an idea: let him go and he'll definitely give us some money. Given Mikey's desire to do things by the book (and the fact that his pockets are bulging with unspendable duffel-bag cash) Nasri's pitch doesn't gain much traction.

Mikey's choice is clear, then. We arrest him, all the while beaming with pride for being a good intern. I wonder whether Nasri might let us list him as a reference on Mikey's CV when all this is over.

BELOW: They say you should dress for the job you want. I'd say Mikey wants to be frontman of an early 2000s ska band.

UNDER THE RADAR

Mikey T has come a long way. Now that he has a few missions under his belt – and quite a few skill points slotted into the stealth attribute – his usefulness in the field has really skyrocketed. There are still occasional missteps (most notably when I absent-mindedly interact with a computer console in a warehouse full of advanced weaponry and inadvertently fire an anti-aircraft missile at a wall), but these don't seem to harm Mikey's reputation within the Alpha Protocol team as a polite young man.

The only difficulty is that *Alpha Protocol*'s campaign doesn't really support the kind of pure stealth approach that might best suit a dedicated rules-follower like Mikey. As such, we're left with no choice but to occasionally choke, punch, or delicately shoot an enemy guard or two. On the plus side, Mikey's superiors seem delighted with his progress. They decide that the time has come to set our sights on Ali Shaheed, the

ABOVE: I did try dressing Mikey in more field-appropriate attire, but the armour plating came at the expense of making him even worse at sneaking. It had to go.

IT'S HERE THAT THE CAUSE-AND-EFFECT MECHANICS OF ALPHA PROTOCOL POP UP

wealthy backer of terrorist outfit Al-Samad and our ultimate target in the region.

It's here that the occasional cause-and-effect mechanics of *Alpha Protocol* pop up to throw us a bone or two. It turns out that by arresting Nasri, we can expect Shaheed's guards to be less well-armed than they might otherwise have been. Before I can get too excited about this victory for non-violent due process, I note that we'll also benefit from the fact that Mikey killed an entire squad of Shaheed's elite guards in a previous mission. The fact that I don't remember which guards this windfall refers to probably isn't a good sign of Mikey's record as a master of infiltration. Nevertheless, I'm hopeful that these boons will make up for the fact that we've been unable to spend a penny on gear or intel in this playthrough.

As it happens, the final mission of our Saudi Arabian roadtrip is a shambles from start to finish. Mikey gets lost in a graveyard, is repeatedly spotted by cameras, and somehow manages to find tens of thousands of dollars even though I am specifically trying to avoid it. It's reached the point where I worry he's at risk of being over-encumbered by the sheer weight of paper money he's carrying.

As Mikey nears his objective I spend ten minutes trying to sneak my way past Shaheed's most trusted lieutenant, only for a cutscene to interrupt proceedings at the last possible second. I can only watch as Mikey unceremoniously boots the lieutenant off a bridge with all the stealth and finesse of a town crier on a bouncy castle.

I wonder if we might yet avoid detection, but when the lieutenant's body literally bounces off the bonnet of the lead vehicle in Shaheed's convoy, I realise that the game is probably up. At this point, all those hard-earned stealth skillpoints count for little as I note the sudden abundance of rocket launchers and grenades on every available surface between Mikey and Shaheed's heavily armed Stryker attack vehicle. The explosive-strewn battle that follows is a test of Mikey's physical fortitude and my fraying patience, but our shared perseverance is finally rewarded when our rockets open up the Stryker like a cantaloupe in a vice.

Shaheed stumbles out, and Mikey prepares to revive the by-the-book routine that worked so well on Nasri. Once again, *Alpha Protocol*'s action-packed cutscenes have other ideas. Missiles rain down on our position. As if that wasn't bad enough, it seems that we're the target. There's a mole in the team.

And that's where we leave Mikey T. Can he clear his name? And will he ever finish that laminating? Tune in next time to find out. ■

GAINING VALUABLE WORK EXPERIENCE IN

ALPHA PROTOCOL

PART 2

Can our rule-abiding intern really be a rogue agent? *By James Nouch*

Mikey T has been declared a rogue agent. He's being hunted by his own government. He can trust no one. That's a pretty shocking development, because Mikey is a 19-year-old intern at Alpha Protocol, and therefore not actually an agent at all. A week ago, he was trusted with nothing more complicated than keeping the Alpha Protocol printer topped up with toner. In the time since then, he's travelled to Saudi Arabia, arrested an international arms dealer, been betrayed by a mole within the agency, and cleaned up most of the printer ink he spilt.

Now, Mikey's hunkering down in a safe house in Moscow. Mina Tang is the only member of the Alpha Protocol team who isn't out for his blood, and thankfully she has continued to supply us with intelligence briefings even while her colleagues plot our capture and/or murder. To put it in the parlance of the international intelligence community, the week has been an absolute mare.

As an inveterate rule-follower and people-pleaser, Mikey is desperate to clear up this whole 'rogue agent' misunderstanding as soon as possible. His best case scenario involves him being welcomed back into the Alpha Protocol fold, having his hair tousled by agency honcho Nancy Westridge, and perhaps receiving some kind of medal for being very brave. When an onscreen dialogue introduces this chapter of the game as 'Operation Blood Feud', that possibility starts to feel more remote.

Faced with a variety of mission threads to pursue, I choose the one named 'Assault Lazo's Yacht', on the basis that spending some time on a huge, extravagant boat might help Mikey forget some of his troubles. As for our target, Mina informs us that Lazo is a prominent member of the Russian mafia. What's more, he may have intel on Halbech Corporation, the villainous defence contractor that's masterminded the plot to discredit and ultimately terminate Mikey. That's all the incentive we need – Mikey gears up and we ship out.

THE RULES

1. You're working for exposure. You can't spend any money.
2. Do things by the book. Interns don't get to break the rules.
3. Talk to everyone and be sure to make a good impression.

PARTY OF ONE

A full moon hangs over Moscow, and its shimmering reflection illuminates the waters around Mikey's extremely loud and incredibly conspicuous motorised dinghy. Rather than, say, abandoning the craft at a discreet distance and stealthily swimming up to Lazo's mega-boat, Mikey just steers himself into place at the stern of the yacht, his outboard motor chugging cacophonously the whole time. Despite all the advancement points I've poured into Mikey's stealth skill, it would seem that he's still an absolute boob.

Fortunately for us, Lazo is having the world's saddest and loudest party. Music blares from the speakers and multicoloured lights flare over an empty dance floor that's watched over by Russia's dourest guards. After the procession of wrong turns, botched infiltrations and accidental explosions that characterised Mikey's operations in Saudi Arabia, I'm amazed to see him demonstrate something close to competence here.

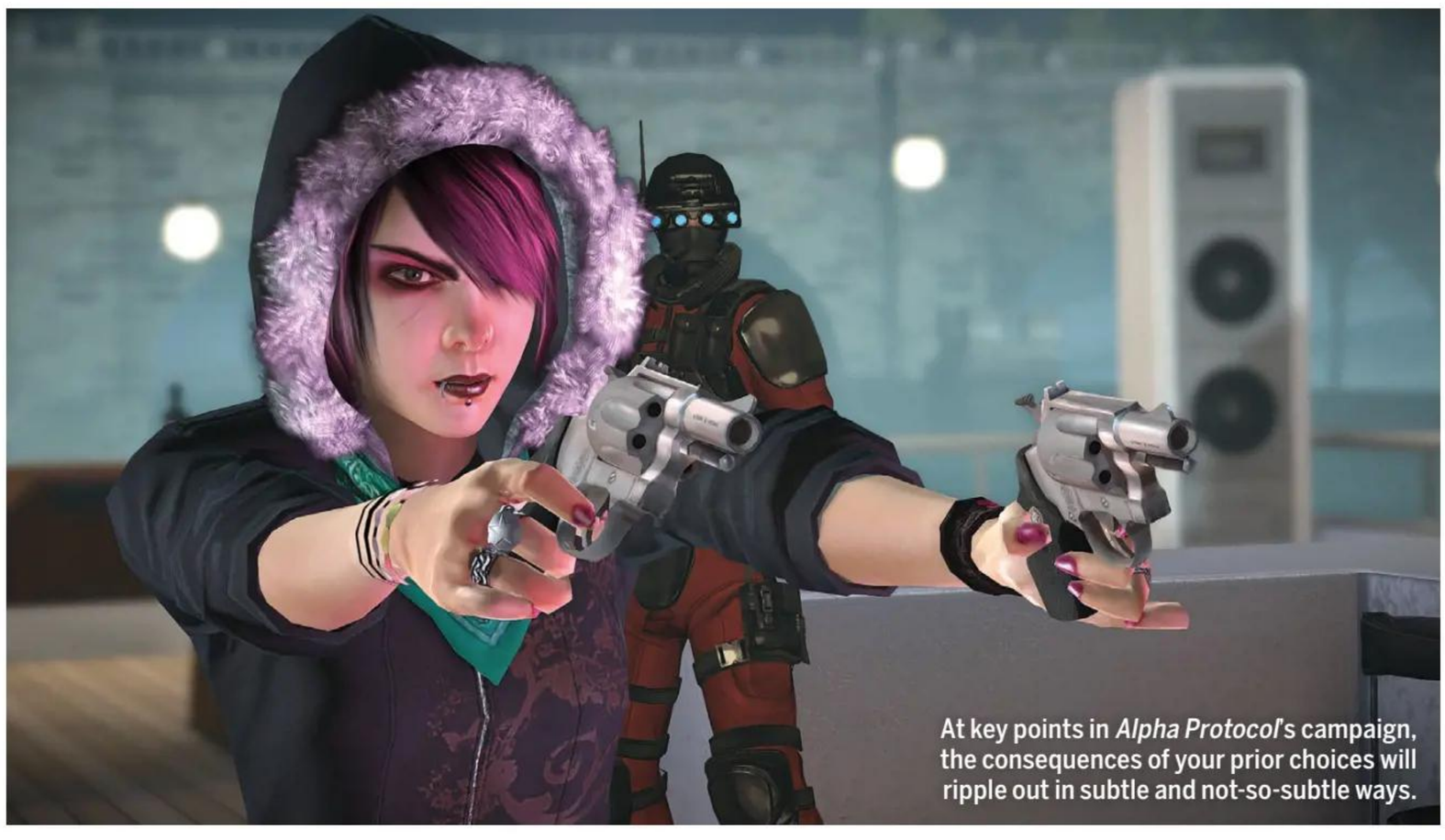
FORTUNATELY FOR US, LAZO IS HAVING THE WORLD'S SADDEST AND LOUDEST PARTY

Mikey dodges the surveillance cameras with ease, evading a string of enemy patrols to reach the bow of the ship. It's at this point, however, that the murdering begins. Because, as well as shovelling point after point into Mikey's stealth attribute, I've also been levelling up his pistol proficiency. My thinking here is that the silenced pistol is the defining weapon of the secret agent, and therefore the option that our nervous intern would be most likely to gravitate towards in his search for approval and the veneer of professionalism. My choice was also influenced by the fact that non-lethal ghost runs aren't really a thing in *Alpha Protocol* anyway, and this at least felt more spy-like than funnelling points into SMGs.

Whatever my rationale, the result is that Mikey T is now a killing machine. In particular, his ability to line up headshots and execute them from cover is a game-breaking addition to his skillset, making it trivially easy to dispatch lone guards from a safe hiding place. The 'chainshot' skill, meanwhile, is perfect for dealing with larger groups of lackeys, with time slowing to a crawl while you place up to six precision shots at your leisure.

So, our mild-mannered intern leaves a trail of bodies in his wake as he heads below deck in search of Lazo. Watching him operate, I can't help but wonder what his erstwhile colleagues would make of him now. Just days ago, Mikey could barely operate a hole punch without close supervision. Now, he's perforating mobsters with all the sangfroid and efficiency of a contract killer. He's come a long way.

My proud reverie doesn't last long. Mikey finds Lazo in the belly of the boat, readies his silenced pistol, and promptly snaps to the wrong piece of cover, sliding directly into the room rather than bracing stealthily against the doorframe. In motion, he looks



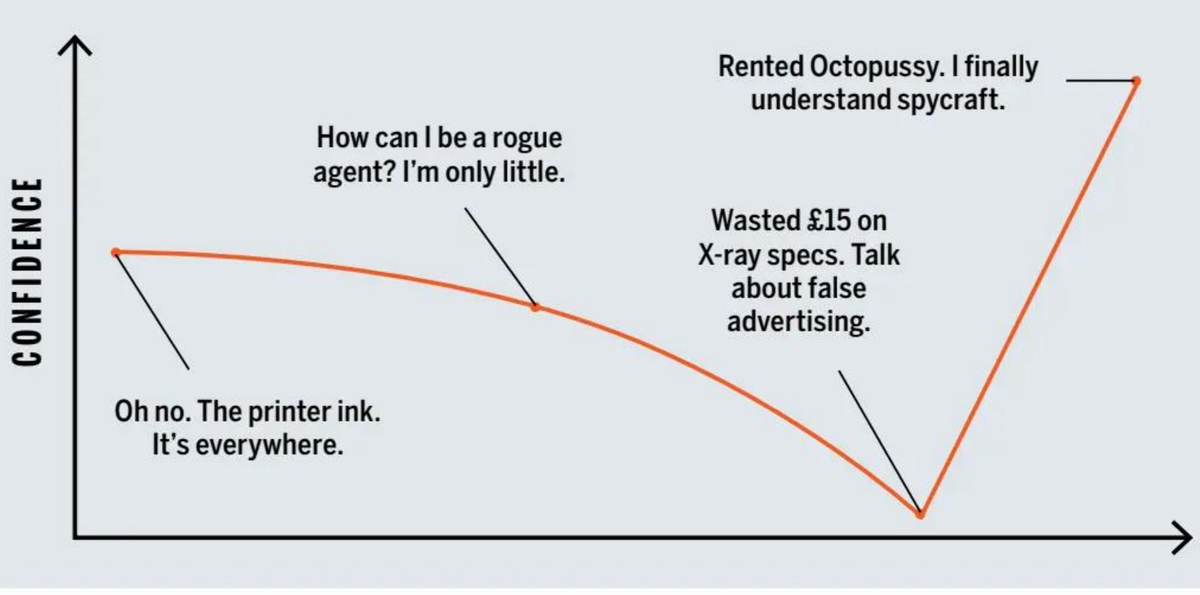
At key points in *Alpha Protocol*'s campaign, the consequences of your prior choices will ripple out in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

like Anton Chigurh crossed with Mr Bean. Inevitably, Lazo panics, Mikey riddles him with holes in slow-motion, and we sprint on out of there in a stupor of embarrassment.

Before I can start asking questions like, "what was the point of any of this?" a mercenary group storms the yacht. Their leader – a woman whose defining character trait seems to be dyed hair and an oversized belt buckle saying 'TEXAS' – directs her retinue of G22 mercs to open fire on Mikey and an agonising boss battle begins amid the strobing lights of the yacht's dance floor. Frustratingly, stealth isn't an option here and our enemies are just slightly out of effective pistol range. Mikey's competence evaporates. As he cowers behind the DJ booth I think I can see his soul patch quivering in something resembling fear. Or sorrow.

FLUSTER BOMB

Charting Mikey T's levels of personal confidence over time



RULES OF ATTRACTION

Mina won't stop flirting with us, and it's becoming a problem. Despite the fact that I've been choosing the dialogue options labelled as 'professional', Mina continues to pepper her vital intelligence briefings with playful innuendo and winking suggestion. Mikey can't contact Alpha Protocol's HR department (since they're trying to kill him), so I continue to select the dullest responses at every opportunity. Mikey's vibe at this point is less 'international superspy' and more 'pedantic actuary'.

Keen to escape the simmering sexual tension, Mikey heads out on a mission to investigate a lead at Leningradski Station. First impressions are promising – there's nothing remotely sexy about rail infrastructure or the tracksuit clad mafiosos that guard it. Just as Mikey breathes a long sigh of relief, however, SIE turns up.

She's armed with a comically large machine gun, dressed in a tank top and pink aviators, and speaks in a stream of German-accented sexual innuendo. Between the character model and the writing (sample dialogue: "Seeing you in action makes me want to [long pause suggestive of devastating lust] debrief you."), SIE is what might happen if you asked Benny Hill to write a strong female character. Our poor intern flees the scene as swiftly as possible, searching in vain for anyone that won't try to have sex with him or murder him. Unable to satisfy either condition, I chart us a course out of Moscow. Next stop: Rome.

CONFIDENCE TRICK

I am beginning to think that Mikey is getting a little big for his breeches. Following up on a lead that suggests we investigate some ancient ruins on the outskirts of Rome, I'm stunned to see our hero – who is 19 years old may I remind you – speeding into frame on a motorcycle. Riding into the fray on the back of a powerful hog is not very intern-like. It's positively Bond-esque.

And how did he pay for it? After all, Mikey's status as an unpaid intern prohibits us from spending any money on this playthrough, despite the fact that we are still finding towering sacks of cash on every surface we pass. I check the inventory screen to see how much we've accumulated and discover that Mikey is carrying a quarter of a million dollars in cash. The tensile strength of his money belt must be astonishing.

Despite this fabulous wealth, Mikey's inventory is bare. It's been ten hours since I've seen a first aid kit. At one point I hop onto the safe house computer and access the equipment store. The range of high-end equipment on offer is dizzying, from upgraded weapons to reams of mission-critical intel, all of it available for a pittance. There's even armour that offers huge buffs to your 'sound dampening' attribute, so that Mikey's keys won't keep jangling around in his pockets every time he tries to sneak past a guard. I leave the store empty-handed, feeling more despondent than ever.

But Mikey's foray into the Roman ruins isn't just significant for his

BELOW: Unless you pump several points into the stealth skill, you can expect to be constantly spotted at outlandish distances by eagle-eyed guards.

ABOVE: Building rapport with fellow agents isn't just good for your self-esteem – you'll also unlock handy bonuses such as reduced skill cooldowns.

THE TENSILE STRENGTH OF HIS MONEY BELT MUST BE ASTONISHING

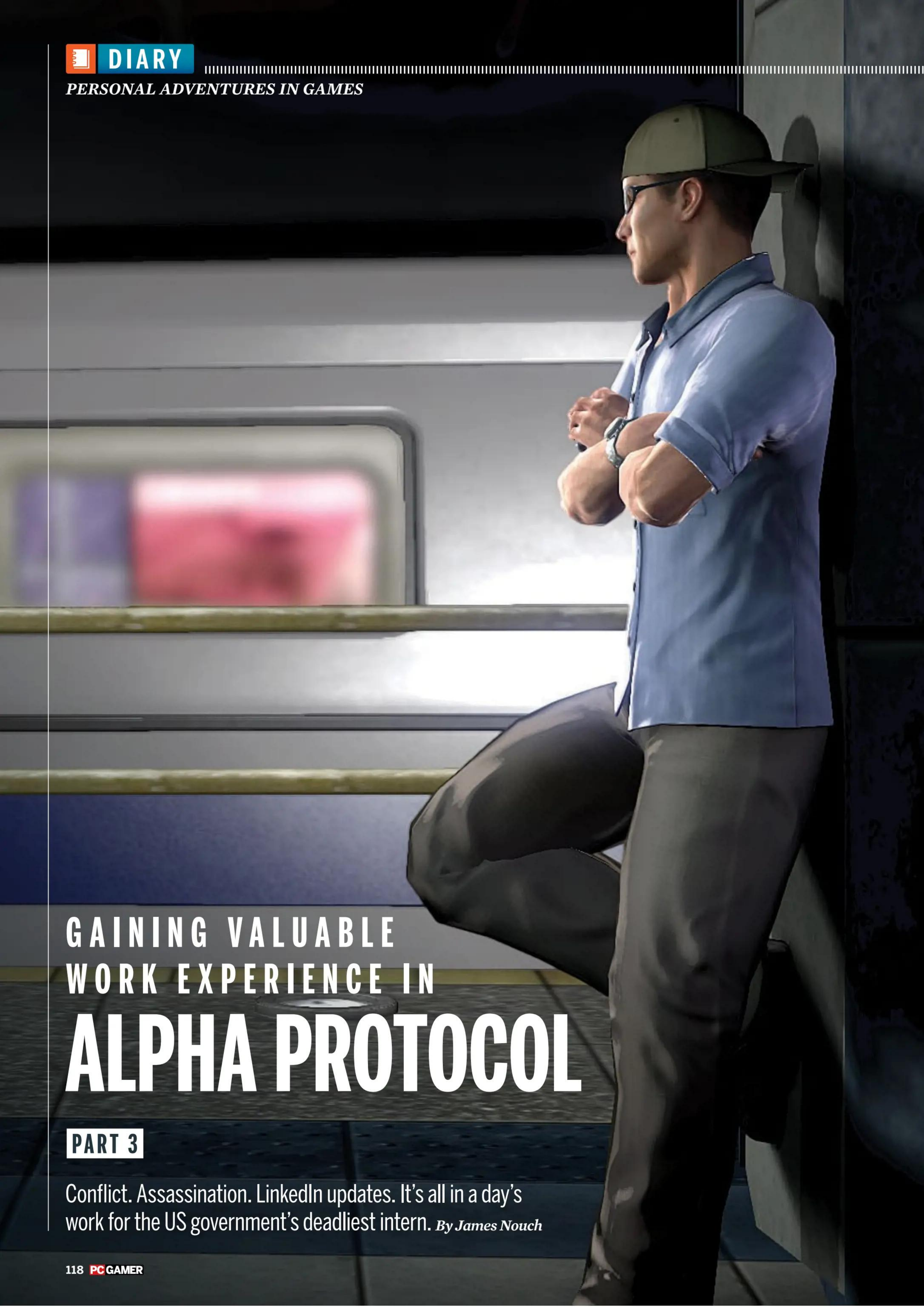
choice of cutscene transportation – it's also a red letter day for us in terms of equipment. For no reason that I can make sense of, these neglected catacombs are jam-packed with pistol accessories and upgrades. Every other crypt seems to hold a high capacity magazine or a modded barrel alongside the requisite pile of chalky old bones. Mikey even fishes out an upgraded silencer from among the dusty Roman detritus.

Eventually, the warren of claustrophobic old rubble opens up into an inviting and open space. Now, I know the trappings of a good old-fashioned videogame ambush when I see them (there's even piles of precious ammo dotted around the place!). Mikey, on the other hand, knows only about pistols and soul patch grooming, so he blithely potters into the open. A hackable comm array awaits us, like a tempting piece of gouda resting on the gleaming platter of a rat trap. Mikey clicks and clacks at the keyboard, and a small army of guards promptly storm into view, each hellbent on halting the data transfer we've initiated and enacting violence on a work experience kid.

As with any shootout where stealth is off the table, Mikey struggles. His paltry HP pool, entry-level armour, and lack of any health-restoring consumables leave him with the toughness and endurance of a sickly kitten. The gunfight that follows is long and frequently embarrassing, as Mikey is reduced to sprinting from bullet-ridden column to bullet-ridden column while waiting for his meagre armour to recharge. After what feels like an eternity, the last guard falls and the data transfer finishes.

The cutscene that follows is infuriating in terms of the levels of unearned bravado on display. Mikey pointlessly initiates a massive explosion within the complex of ruins, with no apparent concern for the cultural or heritage value of the site. He then – and I must emphasise here that I am not making this up – does a doughnut on his motorbike before accelerating away and popping a wheelie as explosions continue to roar behind him.

That's it. I need time to cool off. It's one thing to spend hours molly-coddling a teen – it's quite another to realise that they have come away from the experience somehow thinking they're Roger Moore. So, even though our intern remains hunted by Alpha Protocol, and the villains at Halbech Corporation remain very much at large, I leave Mikey T here, wheelie-ing into the Italian sunset. Will he return? I suppose that very much depends on whether he is found driving a superbike on an expired provisional licence. ■



GAINING VALUABLE WORK EXPERIENCE IN ALPHA PROTOCOL

PART 3

Conflict. Assassination. LinkedIn updates. It's all in a day's work for the US government's deadliest intern. *By James Nouch*

The Halbech Corporation has brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. Faced with declining profits, the villainous defence contractor and its dead-eyed CEO Henry Leland have been working tirelessly to stoke conflict around the world. In the process, they've armed terrorists, undermined governments, and even framed loveable, hardworking interns for crimes they didn't commit.

Our hero Mikey T has been following their dastardly trail from Saudi Arabia through to Moscow and Rome, pursued all the while by his erstwhile employers at the secret intelligence agency that is Alpha Protocol. Now, fresh intel tells us that Halbech is planning to assassinate Taiwan's president. To uncover more, we'll have to infiltrate a closed gathering of Chinese intelligence agents in Taipei. If we get this right, we'll be one step closer to ensuring that Leland and his lackeys pay for their crimes.

But this is one mission that's too dangerous for an intern to tackle alone. This time, Mikey's working with a ragtag band of specialists in an Ocean's Eleven-style crew. The first member of the Save The World gang is Mina Tang, our handler and occasional sender of inappropriate emails. Next is Scarlet Lake, a hotshot journalist who is surprisingly open to the idea of risking life and limb in order to help a 19-year-old work experience kid steal data from the Chinese government. The final member of our outfit is Steven Heck, a local informant who is either a high-level CIA operative or an unstable fantasist.

The tension mounts as the crew gathers for a pre-mission briefing. Mikey, ever eager to play by the rules, explains that the gathering is taking place in a hotel, so we'll need to be careful to avoid any civilian casualties. Steven is visibly crestfallen. This does not bode well.

THE RULES

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2. Do things by the book. Interns don't get to break the rules.
3. Talk to everyone and be sure to make a good impression.

THERE WILL BE BLOOD

We've barely taken two steps into the building before Steven starts murdering people. It occurs to me that Mikey could just turn around and leave him to his fate. I eventually have to concede that interns don't usually leave colleagues to die in hotel corridors. What's more, jumping to Steven's aid might one day serve as a good example of a time Mikey acted as a team player, and you know that kind of question is going to come up in a job interview.

Energised by that thought, Mikey pulls out a pistol and headshots a half dozen guards in a bullet-time blur. As the shell casings bounce off the polished floor, Mikey reflects that this is probably just the kind of thing you need to do if you're going to progress from intern, to paid staff member, to high-flying executive someday. This is what getting ahead in the business world must look like.

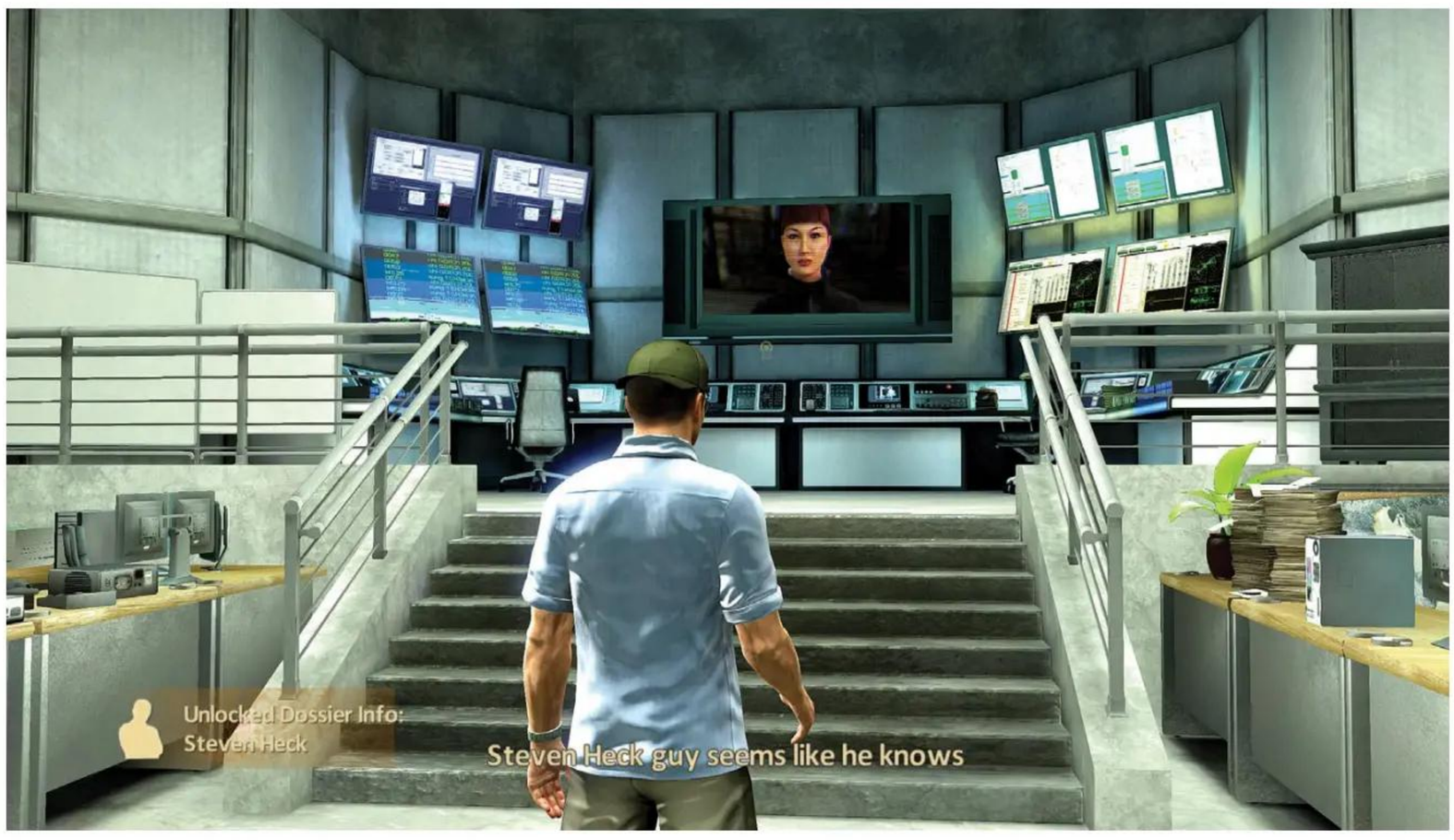
As the staccato sounds of gunfire fade, we can begin this 'infiltration' in earnest. Thankfully, Mikey's stealth skills are now indistinguishable from magic. Activating the Shadow Operative perk, Mikey turns fully invisible for 20 seconds, during which time he can sprint his way through hotel foyers, pausing only to choke out a guard or two as he passes.

MIKEY PULLS OUT A PISTOL AND HEADSHOTS GUARDS IN A BULLET-TIME BLUR

Armed with these supernatural abilities, strolling past the remaining hotel security guards is a breeze. Better yet, my fears that the Chinese intelligence operatives of the NSB will prove in any way resistant to Mikey's reality-bending powers are unfounded. Faster than you can say 'tactical espionage action', Mikey is hacking his way into a laptop that's chock full of state secrets. A few seconds of clickety-clacking later and we have what we came for: the dossier on Omen Deng. This, it seems, is the person that Halbech has hired to assassinate President Ronald Sung. All that's left to do is escape with the data.

And that's when Steven Heck pipes up. Apparently, the NSB has a profile on him and Heck wants us to delete it while we're in the system. This is obviously a terrible idea (we have the data we came for and there's still time to escape undetected) and it's becoming clearer by the second that Steven is nothing more than a murderous tagalong. Nevertheless, Mikey's desperate desire to make friends and abide by his admittedly sketchy understanding of GDPR best practice kicks in. He dutifully deletes the file, and the hotel is immediately filled with the sound of piercing sirens.

It would be fair to say that escaping the building is a challenge. NSB agents and hotel security are both on high alert, and Mikey's continued lack of any body armour or toughness-based perks mean that we have firmly entered the one-shot-kill portion of the game. As yet another grenade lands at Mikey's feet, I wonder how the president of Taiwan would feel to know that his fate now rests in the trembling, unpaid hands of this well-meaning bumbler.



A SHOT IN THE DARK

President Sung is stood in the open air addressing a crowd of hundreds. He knows that any one of these

people could be the assassin who has been sent to kill him (he recently received a warning from a polite young American with exquisitely sculpted facial hair) but he took to the stage anyway. High above the stage and the crowds, in the dark corners of Taipei's Memorial Hall, a battle is unfolding. Mikey T may have met his match.

Omen Deng is a master of stealth, able to spew bullets from cover before melting back into the shadows. To make matters worse, he's an expert at close-quarters combat. Fortunately, Mikey's Chainshot ability, which enables him to literally stop time and line up six headshots in a row, gives him one hell of a leg-up. Eventually, our adversary falters and falls, bloodied and defeated.

Because *Alpha Protocol* is written by sociopaths, we're now given the option to execute Omen Deng in cold blood. That isn't really Mikey's style (a case in point: he's still too nervous to use the toilet for anything other than a swift number one during work hours), but he does take the opportunity to press Deng for information on the hit.

And that's when we discover that Deng isn't an assassin after all – he's a double agent working for Taiwanese intelligence! What's more, he thought that Mikey was the assassin. It's farcical – like an episode of Fawlty Towers in which Basil and Manuel have a hilarious misunderstanding even though they're both just trying to ensure the continued political stability of Taiwan. Seen in this light, it's a real shame that Mikey and Deng just spent several minutes repeatedly shooting one another in the chest and head for no real reason whatsoever.

Just as Mikey engages his diaphragm to engage in a full-throated chuckle at the absurdity of all this, somebody shoots Ronald Sung. The president collapses at his podium, felled by an unseen sniper's bullet. Mikey winces. This little mishap isn't going to help his job prospects.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

At long last, Mikey is face to face with Henry Leland. The Halbech CEO is the puppet-master who has masterminded every terrible thing that's happened to the world (and, more importantly, to Mikey) in our story so far. Thanks to him, the president of Taiwan has been shot, World War III looms, and America's most go-getting intern has been left with no real adult supervision to speak of.

As if Halbech's imminent triumph wasn't bad enough, this entire conversation is only possible because Mikey has handed himself in, surrendering to the Alpha Protocol operatives that have been hunting him. In a just world, Mikey's erstwhile colleagues would have greeted him with open arms and an Employee of the Month certificate. Heads of department would have gathered to welcome him. "Welcome back," Sean Darcy would smile. "We want you to work here, for actual money," Alan Parker would add. "You're like a son to me, and you did a fabulous job with that laminating," agency head Yancy Westridge would say. Instead, in one of the widest gulfs between hoped-for-outcome and disappointing reality that I've ever seen, Mikey is set to be executed.

As our hero struggles to take this all in, Leland smugly recounts the events that have brought us to this point, pausing only to smugly taunt us for our (rare, entirely understandable) missteps or to smugly adjust his nauseating yellow shirt. It comes as something of a shock, therefore, when Leland pauses his self-satisfied narrative to make Mikey an offer. Leland wants to give him a job. At Halbech.

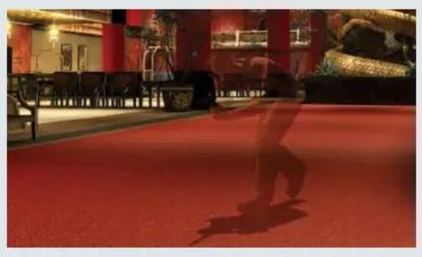
This is everything that Mikey has been working towards. All the unpaid hours he's put in; all the enthusiastic networking he's been doing; all the necks he's snapped because someone vaguely grown-up told him to – it's all been leading up to this moment. He should be elated, but something about Leland's plan to grow rich off the back of all-out global

SKILLS-BASED CV

Skills Mikey is bringing to his next interview

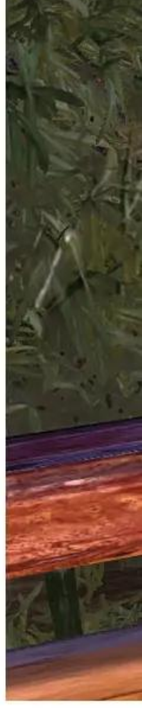
TEAMWORK
Capable of collaborating with others to meet a shared goal. Even with Steven, who was awful.

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY
Naturally optimistic, even in the face of challenging and overwhelming circumstances.



TURN INVISIBLE
You know the invisibility cloak from Harry Potter? I can do that anytime I want.

UNFAILING POLITENESS
Even when all my colleagues are trying to kill me, I remain professional and composed.



BELOW: Choices really do matter in *Alpha Protocol*, and your final mission may vary considerably based on decisions you made much earlier in the game.

ABOVE: Mikey's intense specialisation in the stealth and pistol-wielding skills make him almost undetectable to human patrols yet still incredibly conspicuous to cameras and automated turrets.

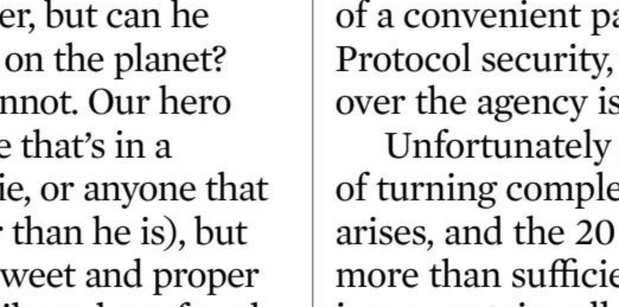
IN SPITE OF ALL THE NECK-SNAPPING HE IS A SWEET AND PROPER LITTLE YOUNGSTER

thermonuclear war has put a dampener on the occasion. Mikey may be the ultimate people-pleaser, but can he accept a job offer from the shittiest man on the planet?

The answer, it turns out, is that he cannot. Our hero may be a little too eager to please anyone that's in a position of authority (or anyone with a tie, or anyone that he suspects is more than five years older than he is), but in spite of all the neck-snapping he is a sweet and proper little youngster at heart. Leland doesn't like to be refused, and our meeting ends. Mikey is left to await his fate in the very same cell that this playthrough began in.

ENDGAME

There's not really a breezy, lighthearted way to recount this part of Mikey's story. He's escaped confinement and taken out hordes of agency operatives and security staff. He's killed Alan Parker (Alpha Protocol's senior intelligence analyst) before dispatching Sean Darcy (Alpha Protocol field agent and recipient of my inaugural 'most bugged boss fight' award). At some point, he fought a helicopter. It should tell you something about the relentless intensity of *Alpha Protocol*'s final mission that I can't really remember the context of him blasting a Black Hawk chopper out of the sky.



And now, he's face to face with Leland once again. The telltale presence of a health bar at the top of the screen suggests that the time for discussing job offers and relocation packages and contributory pension schemes has, sadly, passed. As he gloats from the top of a convenient parapet, flanked by swarms of Alpha Protocol security, the true extent of Leland's control over the agency is made clear.

Unfortunately for Leland, his enemy is still capable of turning completely bloody invisible when the need arises, and the 20 second time limit on this power is more than sufficient for Mikey to run past the guards, jog up a stairwell, and unleash hell on a certain CEO's head at short range.

Leland is dead, but many questions remain. Will his death be enough to stop Halbech? What happened to Alpha Protocol's chief of operations, Yancy Westridge? And is Mikey going to be able to submit at least some of the expenses he's incurred during several hard weeks of globetrotting espionage?

None of that seems to matter, though, as Mikey exits the Alpha Protocol facility and steps behind the wheel of a conveniently moored motorboat. Explosions roar in the background as he steers it into the sunset. Mikey's taking a break from the corporate world. He's earned it. ■

KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE II

Make Henry's medieval adventure a little easier (or harder). *By Christopher Livingston*

K*ingdom Come: Deliverance II*: it ain't *Skyrim*. That's not a criticism, mind you, just a hard truth. They're both RPGs, but *KCDII* is aiming for a more authentic experience when it comes to combat, travel, alchemy, and many of its other systems – heck, even wearing a helmet and putting the visor down isn't all that straightforward in *KCDII*.

The deliberate and meticulous nature of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*'s systems are a big part of what makes it such a great and immersive experience, but that doesn't mean everything about these systems is universally beloved. Tweaking a few systems to make them less labour intensive isn't unthinkable, which is why the mods that sprung up so quickly for the RPG mostly focus on making the game a bit easier.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
February 4, 2025

DEVELOPER
Warhorse Studios

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

LINK
store.steampowered.com

OUR SAVIOUR

The most popular mod for *KCDII* involves the most basic function of the game: saving your progress. Just like in the original *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, Henry needs to use a Savior Schnapps potion to manually save the game, otherwise he'll have to find a bed and sleep in it. That means collecting herbs and mixing them with wine at an alchemy bench – not a huge hassle, really, except when you just want to quickly save but realise you're completely out of the ingredients

Your ancestors will forgive you for using mods, I promise.

MEDIEVAL CRIMES

Some KCDII mods defy explanation

ULTRA-LOW GRAPHICS MODE
Immerse yourself in a version that looks like a *Mount & Blade*.

M82 BARRETT
This mod replaces medieval guns with a giant American-made semi-auto rifles.

SPHERE WORLD
It's all spheres, all the time. Animals, women, horses, doors, they're all spheres now.

EVERYONE LOVES HENRY
More like everyone is Henry: this mod replaces everyone's head in the game with Henry's head.

ABOVE: Make Henry's herb-picking adventure easier on his knees.

RIGHT: No need to brew potions just to save your game.

and nowhere near a crafting table. The *Unlimited Saving II* mod lets you do what the gods of PC gaming intended: save your game whenever the hell you damn well please. I get the idea behind Savior Schnapps, I really do: choices become less important if you can simply undo them and reload a save whenever you want. On the other hand: the heck with that. Sometimes I just wanna quicksave. Now I can.

There are all sorts of other little time-saving mods for *KCDII*, depending on how much you really want to streamline (some would say ruin) your game. Not everyone enjoys herb-gathering (I do) so there are few mods to make it less of a chore, even though that's exactly what it is. First, the mod called *Instant Herb Picking II* does away with the third-person animation that plays every time Henry picks a flower. Now you just press the button and the herb is in your pocket, like in *Skyrim*, instead of having to watch Henry squat for the thousandth time. If you want to keep the squatting but not have to watch a separate cutaway scene, there's also a mod called *1st Person Herb Picking II*, which keeps the camera inside your head, a nice compromise.

That's not all when it comes to herbs. The *Easy to See Herbs II* mod solves one of the biggest complaints about Henry's gardening adventure: it can be really hard to spot what you're looking for in the vanilla game. Especially when it comes to belladonna (one of the ingredients in the Savior Schnapps), some of the game's herbs just don't stand out among the grass, making finding them a brutal and boring hunt. This mod does a nice job of making herbs like mint and nettles pop without making them cartoonishly obvious.

HEAVY METALS

Speaking of stuffing your pockets with plants, you'll also be collecting a lot of other junk on your travels, like clothing, jewellery, armour, shields and weapons. Hauling your loot back and selling it can be a challenge due to a semi-realistic carry weight and the fact that merchants don't have bottomless pockets of coin. That's why two popular tweaks are the *Carry Weight* mod, which starts by doubling the amount you can carry and allows you to raise it to infinite levels, and a mod called *Rich Merchants*, which means vendors can spend more on your haul. Carry more loot, sell more of it at once. You'll have Henry back on his feet in no time.

While you're out bashing bandits, sleeping in haystacks, and riding horses, you're going to wind up... how should I put this... smelling like complete ass. Being stinky in *KCDII* is a feature that means people might treat you worse if they get a whiff, and your stench can even give you away during stealth. That means Henry's gotta wash his clothes and take baths: a lot of them. The *Stay Clean for Longer* mod means you won't get quite as filth-covered quite as quickly, so you'll need to take fewer baths to stay clean.

Finally, since wearing a helmet with the visor down will black out some of your eyesight, there's a mod called *No Helmet Vision* that removes that effect, making your life a lot easier, if less realistic.

THERE ARE ALL SORTS OF OTHER LITTLE TIME-SAVING MODS

It's worth noting that not everyone wants to make *KCDII* harder: there are plenty of modders making the RPG more immersive and challenging. The *Tougher Economy* mod cuts the sell value of equipment in half to prevent the same problem the original game had: Henry getting incredibly rich before he's halfway through his adventure.

There are also several mods that nerf your abilities for finding your way around in the world. They didn't have GPS in medieval times, so *Toggle Hide Compass* stops you from getting free directions just by glancing at your HUD. The *No Player Map Marker* mod removes the icon from your map that shows you exactly where you are. Another mod called *Scout Hardcore Mode* removes all objective markers, too, and stops the map from centring on your precise location. Now your map is just a regular old map and you can't tell which way you're going without looking at landmarks and roadsigns. Good luck, Henry! You're going to bloody need it mate. ■

WEIRD MODS

Play Guitar Hero as Lincoln, cos you can. *Joshua Wolens*

Mods are the lifeblood of PC gaming. Consoles can keep their pomp and highfalutin talk of convenience, whatever that is, I'm busy turning *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* into a six-way gang war, vaporising myself in the prologue of *Fallout 4* and turning *Skyrim* into a boundless playground of fetishes so hyper-specific they'd give the Borgias pause. I mean, I'm not doing that last one, actually. Don't put in the magazine that I'm doing that last one.

Thing is, though, some mods are so mind-bogglingly niche that you can't really justify building an entire piece just to cover them. It means you end up with a long list of weird and wonderful mods that you'd like to write about but can't. But on the walls of the PC Gamer offices hangs a bronze commandment, "When life gives you a backlog of several relatively small articles you want to write, turn them into a multi-page roundup." I'm not quite sure why it's there: the plaque is extremely heavy and may be damaging the wall it's hanging on, and it could have just been a Post-It note. Regardless, I'm taking the advice to heart. So here's a few of my favourite hyper-specific mods I never got a chance to write about.

As Souls games go, I think I had the easiest time of all with *Dark Souls II*. It's got some tough fights, but it's the game I had least trouble breezing through with my weird

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE Various	**DEVELOPER** Several
PUBLISHER Many	**LINK** nexusmods.com

ABOVE: On guitar: Abe. On bass: Abe. On drums... Abe!

LEFT: He's the world's best singer, according to him.

TANKS FOR EVERYTHING

Thomas the Tank Engine in other games

SKYRIM
The Really Useful Dragons mod replaces those scaly flying monsters with Thomas.

STARFIELD
Replace your ship with Thomas? Naw. How about you replace every ship with Thomas?.

ELDEN RING
Replace the dragon Agheel with Thomas. Don't worry, he still breathes fire!

RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE
Yes, it's what you think it is. Lady Dimitrescu is now Count Theodora. Yikes.

LEFT: Mario and Luigi finally take on *Resident Evil 4*. Woohoo!

ABOVE: He's just... someone's dad, you know?

hex-throwing guy. Well, time to amend that. And where others may trifle with enemy stats and AI, modder Half Grown Hollow cuts to the quick with *Dark Souls II: Australia Edition* by turning Drangleic upside down. Everything is harder in Australia, so problem solved. *Dark Souls II* is now more challenging than its successor and predecessor games and all we've done is turned the camera on its head. Good luck figuring that one out, bucko.

SHRED, HISTORICALLY

Next, meet WorseTYou, a modder with bright eyes, a full heart, and one overriding mission: to let you play *Guitar Hero World Tour* as everyone who ever happened. At least, I assume that's their mission, owing to the fact their Nexus user files page includes 119 mods at time of writing that let you play as anyone from Someone's Dad to Barney Calhoun.

But enough about that. The real meat here is the dizzying number of current and historical world leaders the modder has crammed into the game. Want to play as Abe Lincoln? Teddy Roosevelt? Um, Joseph Stalin? Everyone knows Kim Jong Un has a song in his heart, now he can finally let it out.

Is it in good taste? No. Is it necessary? Also no. Yet I'm glad I live in the same world anyway. Let every mad dream find fulfilment. Let every delegate to the 13th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party learn to shred.

Next: "Just be happy that this extremely niche mod exists for your extremely niche problem," reads 1Nye's description of the *No Draugr Hair (or Beards)* mod for *Skyrim*, a mod which removes Draugr hair (and beards) from *Skyrim*.

What problem would that be? Draugr hair, of course. The scourge of our times. The word for a fear of corpses is necrophobia. For fear of hair? Trichophobia. Is this *Skyrim*'s first and only mod aimed at players who suffer from trichophobia? Sure, man, that works. Failing that, 1Nye offers the explanation that you could consider it an immersion mod, if you're into that. "Can also be considered immersive if you think hair would still be intact on 500-year-old Nords," says the creator.

Of the nine comments the mod has earned in its lifespan, just one is from someone saying they thought they were the only person who was "VERY BOTHERED" by whatever this problem is. Imagine what an amazing day it was for that person when this popped up in their feed. There's feeling seen, and then there's whatever that is.

WAR IS SCARY

The scent of cordite, the clamour of artillery fire, the blood and the smoke and the guys from *Five Nights at Freddy's* popping up randomly to scare you. War is a nightmare, and something we ought to have grown past as a society, but which remains as a sad holdover from another age (2014, release year of *Five Nights at Freddy's*).

That's the case in *Five Nights at Hearts of Iron 4*, a mod/crime that you can currently find over at the *Hearts of Iron 4* Steam Workshop

EVERYONE KNOWS KIM JONG UN HAS A SONG IN HIS HEART

page. It mashes up the characters of *Five Nights at Freddy's* and the unrivalled destruction of the greatest conflict in human history.

Once you've subscribed, "Every day you've got 1% chance for a jumpscare," in which one of *FNAF*'s many animatronic horrors will appear atop a devastated continent to howl blue murder at you. In times of war, the law falls silent, but Freddy Fazbear speaks up.

OK, I think we're far enough into the article now that the Nintendo legal team won't read this far. SupremeLeader777 spent 2023 turning almost every character in *Resident Evil 4* into almost every character from Mario. There's Krauser Bowser, Luigi Sera, and a new title screen 450% more effectively haunting than the original.

I think what I love about this is that I cannot fathom a single reason anyone would ever seek it out, let alone create it, and yet here it is, stubbornly existing – even expanding – because someone, somewhere, had a weird urge and the means to fulfil it. This is what modding's about, baby. It's about infesting Mario with parasites. ■

The kangaroo with boxing gloves has breached containment and is now hopping between games.

STREETS OF RAGE X

Revisiting the 16-bit era with some added punch. *By Justin Wagner*

It doesn't take much time to pick your average beat-'em-up clean – even *Streets of Rage*, inarguably among the best games in the genre, is about an hour long regardless of which entry you pick up. The fun is in replaying it over and over, getting through with fewer and fewer continues, and roping your friends in for some co-op button mashing; but even so, every well runs dry eventually. Until rogue fans step in, of course.

Streets of Rage X is an OpenBOR recreation of the 16-bit *Streets of Rage* games by developer Kratus which makes those originals feel minuscule. Each game from the Mega Drive trilogy is a mere 'route' on offer here, with each character previously unique to each game now playable in any of them. "But what about game balance?" I hear you retort; where we're going, we don't need it.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 2, 1991

DEVELOPER
Sega

PUBLISHER
Sega

LINK
streets4rage.com

FLAIR KNUCKLE

Combat has seen a ludicrous, maximalist overhaul that feels inspired by *Streets of Rage 4*'s triple-digit juggling combos. You can chain a few hits together in the Genesis games and even score infinite combos with techniques that feel like borderline exploits, but you can keep an enemy trapped in hit stun so long you'll rarely need anything all that extravagant. On the other hand, *X* is so dedicated to form, function's been chucked out a window.

This giant purple guy isn't playable, unfortunately.

FLEXOTERICA

Meet the lesser-known playable fighters

BIG BEN
Big Ben is a real nuisance in the main game due to his inexplicable ability to breathe fire, but now you're free to take out your frustrations by doing it yourself.

ROO
Roo is a kangaroo with boxing gloves and apparent combat training. As if they needed any help to flatten their opponents.

ROCKET
Rocket has a jetpack, which makes me wonder how Mr X's crime syndicate is funded. I might go rogue too, in his shoes; what benefit could outdo a jetpack?

SOUTHER
Souther might look like Freddy Krueger with his red sweater and gnarled face, but he sets himself apart by wearing *two* gloves with big claws on them.

ABOVE: Fine. If the rest isn't ridiculous enough for you, here's a mech.

RIGHT: New damage and hit counters make the science of street brawling all the more exact.

You can string together attacks like it's nothing, and the addition of new super attacks, air grabs, charge attacks and specials takes a game that used to be about careful crowd control and turns it into a combo-fiend sandbox. Most of these additions can be turned off if you'd rather play the game as it was, but it still benefits from the game's suite of video and sound settings and an optional CPU co-op partner.

There's also new defensive options like the dodge roll, parry, guard, and counter attack, which soup up brawls even further. Some of these options aren't present even in the average modern beat-'em-up, and they help *Streets of Rage* feel less like a clunky relic of the '90s and more like the storm of haymakers on display in the original game's box art.

Again, it's certainly overkill at first; the game doesn't amp up the difficulty nearly enough to make all this styling on street punks necessary, and it feels a bit like playing *NBA Jam* as a pair of blokes from *Guilty Gear*. But once you start clearing the game, you'll start to unlock difficulty modifiers which toy with enemy behaviour and quantity. You can also fine-tune your available continues and customise your access to most combat moves on an individual basis, making it easy to hit and get hit exactly as hard as you're comfortable with.

CHOOSE YOUR FIGHTER

If that wasn't enough, *Streets of Rage X* packs in two original modes with further tricks up their sleeves: Survival and Rebellion. Survival is your typical wave defence affair, letting you hone your juggling skills without the hassle of walking to the right, though the option to turn it into a boss rush or a hectic free-for-all is welcome.

Rebellion, though, is probably the game's most tantalising addition. Much like in the story mode, you select a *Streets of Rage* game to play through and select your fight, but just about any character from the original games is playable. And I truly mean any. Play as original final boss Mr X, a kangaroo in boxing gloves, a mech with attached missile launchers – if they appeared as a sprite in the Mega Drive games, they're playable here with their own unique moves, bringing the roster to a whopping 66. Even comparatively massive beat-'em-ups scarcely offer more playable characters than there are seats on the arcade cabinet, making this perhaps the most ludicrous feature on offer. These roster-stuffers play exactly how you might expect they would, drawing on whatever capabilities and animations they have in the base game, and it gave me a new appreciation for each individual sprite I used to thoughtlessly bowl over. I mean, that's still what I'm doing, but now practically anyone can have a turn in the driver's seat.

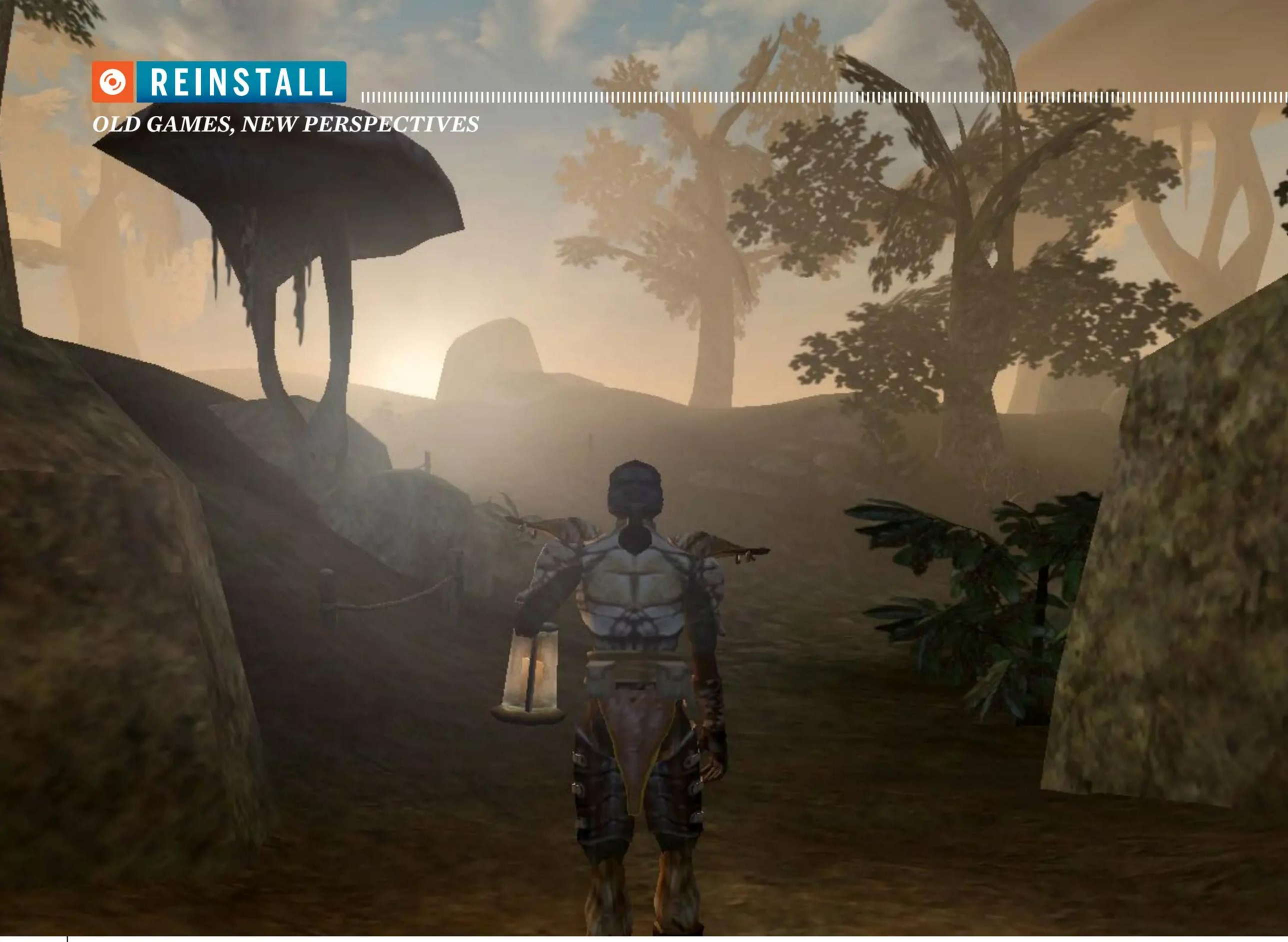
Not every character in Rebellion is as robust as the main cast, with some NPC movesets being decidedly one-note or awkward to handle (most low-level goons are like this). But the option is a riotous novelty, and gunning down droves of mobsters as their very own kingpin

SQUEEZING EVERY DROP OF POTENTIAL OUT OF ITS FIGHTERS

is a deliriously silly remix of the original game's action. The game is feature-rich and customisable in a way the average emulator can't match, squeezing every last drop of potential out of its cast of fighters, most of which previously existed only to get wailed on.

And if you have no interest in any of this, preferring the games in their original incarnations without all these bells and whistles, it's still a PC native recreation of three games which just got delisted from Steam along with the rest of the Sega Mega Drive and Genesis Classics collection. More than a kitchen-sink embellishment on the games, it's also just a handy work of preservation.

It's cliché at this point to call tributes like *Streets of Rage X* a love letter to the original work, but it's hard to sum this remake up any other way. Maybe the original trio is showing its age, but the passion on display in projects like these – which emphasise the action as you might remember it, rather than as it actually was – buoys old favourites with a wellspring of new ways to play on modern hardware. ■



THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

Vvardenfalling in love again. *By Matt Elliott*

It's strange experiencing a sense of urgency in a game I've played for hundreds of hours. But that's what happens when I begin a new adventure in *Morrowind*: a Pavlovian response that makes me want to charge out of the character creation section and start exploring, even though I know I've seen it all before.

Before I can even get to that, however, are the waves of nostalgia. Hearing the creak of timber ships and the reassuring calm of Azura's voice rockets me back to 2002, and the overwhelming promise of freedom, the likes of which, back then, I'd never experienced. Watching the intro reminds me of the stories sparked from my previous experiences: vampire knights, noble savages, reluctant messiahs, hired killers. It's abandoned shacks full of books, sunrises at the foot of statues.

I'm getting ahead – or perhaps behind – myself. I'm not even off the ship yet. The guard arrives and all I can think about is rushing past him so he doesn't slow me down as I sprint to freedom: a manoeuvre I've repeated hundreds of times to speed up the intro. In the best possible way, the opening 30 minutes is pure muscle memory. I make my character, steal everything I can from the first room so I can sell it, collect Fargoth's ring, return it to him to improve my reputation with his friend, Arrille. Even this small act reminds me why the game is so special: I'm five minutes in and I have a contact in the first area, whose backstory I know, and a preferred vendor, from whom I'll get better prices. This specificity is what makes the game sing. On the one hand, Arrille is just another High Elf trader with the exact same face and voice as a hundred other NPCs; on the other, he's the person who sold me my first sword, and a character who means more to me than most of the cast of *Skyrim*. I wonder if the people and places in *Morrowind* have the strange emotional resonance precisely because it's a simpler game than its scions. There's more room here for players to use their imaginations, carve their own stories. I'm filling in narrative gaps that aren't present in *Skyrim* or *Oblivion*.

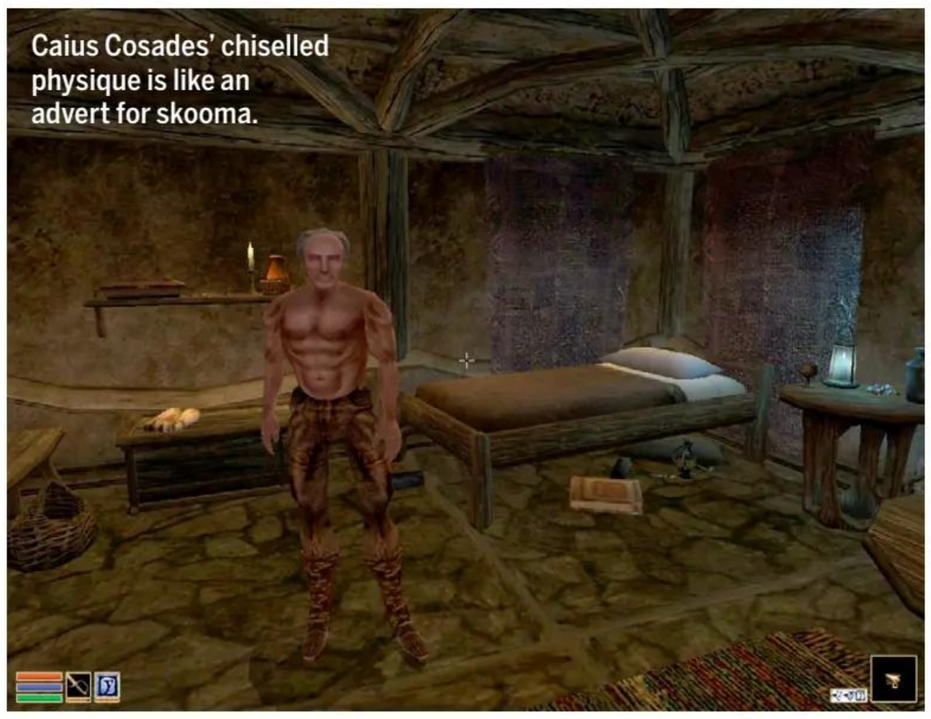
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 2002

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

LINK
bethesda.net



Caius Cosades' chiselled physique is like an advert for skooma.

At some point, this image was meant to be unsettling. Now it's reassuring.

N'WAH SYNCH

I roll a Redguard and choose a custom class, specialising in skills I know will help me survive *Morrowind*'s often frustrating opening hours. This choice is mainly to aid with combat: I want to begin with the highest possible Long Blade skill, so I don't spend the next six hours swinging at Cliff Racers and missing. But it's also a narrative leg up: I decide to make my hero, Mundas, a privateer, because it feels like a good match to my skill set and also sounds more civilised than pirate. Skilled of blade, sharp of tongue, swift of foot; Mundas is the consummate adventurer. From here, it's a mix of routine adventure and semi-religious experience. Getting off the boat and seeing the light reflecting off the water, Silt Strider shrouded in the distant mist, is like revisiting the locked storeroom in my mind palace. I'd forgotten how much this world means to me. The stupidest moments suddenly feel transformative: murdering smugglers,

THE REASSURING CALM OF AZURA'S VOICE ROCKETS ME BACK TO 2002

fighting my first mudcrab, hearing Tarhiel wail as he falls to his ignominious death. It's glorious to be back.

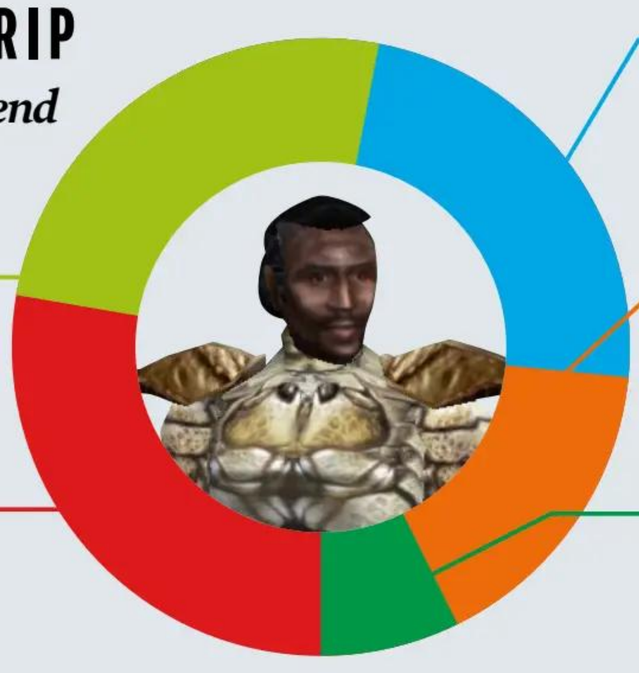
I could take public transport to my next destination, Balmora, but adventure dictates that I use the slower, more interesting path. I remember my first journey from Seeyda Neen to Balmora: how long it took, how often I got lost, how I had to use an actual, physical map for guidance. And, doing it again, I can see why. I stop off at Pelgiad and accidentally make special friends with a horny Khajit called Ahnassi after she compliments my smooth moves. For some players, their adventure would end there: engaged to a gregarious cat-lady before they've even completed the first quest. It's like a trap.

FETCHER QUEST

There's so much else to see, even on this short journey. As well as all the distracting quests – including a

DEADRA TRIP

How you'll spend your time in Vvardenfell



22% Searching for your right ebony pauldron so you finally have the full set.

18% Panicking because you can hear the threatening, distant squawk of a cliff racer.

7% Actually doing anything related to the main quest, even though it's brilliant.

28% Getting lost because you decided to follow the signs instead of using the map.

25% Eating everything, including precious gems, to improve your alchemy skills.

damsel-in-distress who asks you to locate the robber she's fallen in love with – the geography itself is strangely affecting. I love the horror and weirdness of Ghostgate, and the knowledge that the main quest will eventually take me there. I'm still captivated by the misty, liminal, mushroomy landscape. Even public transport, infrastructure, and the economy feel alien, all based on the proliferation of giant insects in Vvardenfell. It's such an unusual, specific take on high fantasy that it still feels fresh. The dragons and trolls and forests of *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*, by comparison, feel numbingly generic.

By the time I finally reach Balmora, I've seen enough distractions to make me feel like I've already been on adventure. And I'm met with conflicting feelings. On the one hand, I'm glad to be out of howling winds and into a place of comfort. The ash storms and howling winds of *Morrowind* make getting inside even more appealing. But another part of me wants to keep walking north, to the strange, crab-shell buildings of Ald'Ruhn, past the West Gash, all the way to Khuul and the northern shores of the island. For some reason, for me, the geographical changes here are more tangible and compelling than in anything that followed. I might be imagining it, but certain areas feel like they have more danger, too; the further from the starting area I stray, the more often I find myself fleeing from flocks of blighted Cliff Racers.

KWAMA CHAMELEON

I stick around Balmora, mainly so I can reacquaint myself with the locals. I drop off a package to Caius Cosades, a member of the Emperor's spy network who's gone so deep undercover that he's accidentally become a genuine drug addict. He's one of Bethesda's best-written characters: a fatherly tangle of honesty and ambiguity, who guides you through the main quest and supports you when you declare yourself the reincarnation of an ancient Dunmer god; a level of

THE OTHER SCROLLS

More games in the free-ranging RPG series

ARENA
1994
An infinite procedurally generated continent to explore was something pretty special for an MS-DOS game, as were its day/night cycle and unforgiving difficulty.

DAGGERFALL
1996
The second *Elder Scrolls* game cuts the map down to two provinces, but still manages to cram in 15,000 points of interest. Its plot seems convoluted, but that didn't stop it selling 700,000 copies.

OBLIVION
2006
Set in a more dangerous version of a national park, *Oblivion* delights in tempting you toward a picturesque cottage then putting something horrible inside it, which can be more interesting than the portals.

SKYRIM
2011
You might have heard of this one. The game that won't die has been released on over 100 different gaming platforms over the past 40 years. Or at least that's what it feels like. Still pretty good to play today.

Get used to this view: it's one you'll be seeing a lot.

support I aspire to provide as a dad and/or manager. This is one of the elements that benefits from the reams of text. There's more depth and subtlety. I find myself trusting people who Caius trusts, and it guides my choices. And even the early missions introduce you to the depth and ambiguity of the game. Yes, I'm killing rats and dealing with egg poachers, but I'm also dealing with Eydis Fire-eye, a Fighters Guild member who assigns quests early in the game. And while some of them seem normal – see the rats above – it quickly becomes apparent that not all is as it seems. And the cool thing here is that the onus is on me, as the player, to dig deeper. By asking trusted contacts, such as Caius, I can end up uncovering the rot within the heart of the Fighter's Guild. Or I can just do as I'm told. It's magnificent.

NEREVAR-ENDING STORY

To finish with, I decide to explore a Dwemer ruin at the request of one of Caius' contacts. He wants a mysterious puzzle box, which absolutely feels like the sort of cursed artefact that I don't even want to be in the same room as, let alone hold. And even finding the ruin is a challenge, because *Morrowind* doesn't have map markers. Instead, I have to follow vague instructions in my journal, like a waddling tourist asking for directions to the Arc de Triomphe in broken French. When I finally arrive, I delve too deeply into the ruins, reaching a ghost-infested lava pit filled with monsters I can't fight because I only have an iron saber. I heroically flee, and, on the way out, I accidentally discover a room that contains the puzzle box. This, then, encapsulates the joy and madness of *Morrowind*. The item isn't on any map. It's not in the possession of a notable NPC. It's on the bottom shelf of a Dwemer bookcase, in a room most people will walk right past. You engage with your surroundings in *Morrowind*, or you fail.

I DECIDE TO EXPLORE A RUIN AT THE REQUEST OF ONE OF CAIUS' CONTACTS

It's insane. And I love it. I could play this game forever. There's an enforced slowness that will make some players gnaw through their mouse mats, but, for me, it adds a sense of narrative richness that's rarely been bettered since. It takes time to do everything. I can level up skills faster in real life than I can in-game. When you finally ascend through the ranks of the Fighter's Guild, for instance, it feels like it has value. Pace and ambiguity improve it, somehow. You're not blindly waddling towards a map marker: you're reading descriptions, analysing your surroundings, becoming familiar with the world. I know the towering fungi and volcanic holloways of Vvardenfell with the same clarity as the pastry counter at Greggs. There's nothing stopping me playing *Skyrim* like this, but it's not just a case of avoiding fast travel. The design decisions are supported by a foundation of detail and wonder that's less present in later games. It's the difference between wearing armour that consists of four parts, compared to eight. I will never be as proud of the set in *Skyrim* as the one I had to fight hard to find in *Morrowind*. I hope that the upcoming *Elder Scrolls* game has a similar level of complexity. I'm not expecting levitation, magic locks, blades and throwing weapons; just a world of complexity and mystery, where my boss is a drug addict and I can accidentally marry a cat. ■

CALL OF DUTY 2

How Call of Duty felt before Modern Warfare. *By Kyle Hoekstra*

It's 2005 and I'm strapped into the back of a truck, driving once more into a North African town in the level The End of the Beginning in the demo for *Call of Duty 2*. Ahead, El Daba is masked by desert haze and a grave instrumental underscores the nervous energy of boys from the 7th Armoured Division. Suddenly fighter planes are swooping above, the tank ahead explodes along with the Tommies who were riding it, and your driver swerves to avoid the wreckage as it chugs smoke over the landscape.

This is the kind of non-interactive, bombastic spectacle which would define the series – not always to its credit. But here, as I replayed the demo yet again, I was impressed. When you leap from the truck you're plunged into a street fight. You push through alleys, which seemed more labyrinthine than they really were, and eliminate artillery crews before signalling the Allied fleet to bombard the docks.

Drama is injected at every opportunity: on the way to grab some final intel, a Tommy busts through a door only to be torn apart by a machine gun. Sometimes the drama isn't scripted: I step onto a backstreet, where I witness an enemy beaten down by an ally who I'm convinced would burn with fury even if it wasn't programmed, and suddenly my role as player feels important only as part of a greater war effort.

I was used to the absurdity of arena shooters. By contrast, *Call of Duty 2* offered immersive, straight-faced spectacle, leaving out pickups and health packs for narrative set-pieces which eclipsed its predecessors. Infinity Ward's status was cemented among shooter devs on PC, and as a console exclusive on Xbox 360 it also helped reinforce its shooter credentials.

When *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* swept the board with its inventive campaign and multiplayer, *Call of Duty 2*'s sincerity instantly looked a bit old hat. By this time Activision's multi-developer, multiplatform *CoD* machine was steaming ahead. Yet while many of its franchise kin proved forgettable, *Call of Duty 2* remains every bit the thrill-ride that Infinity Ward promised it would be.

TOP: Captain Price in World War II, before he was reimagined for *Modern Warfare*.

MOMENTS OF CINEMA

When I finally installed the game from its fresh DVD-ROM, it turned out my war would begin in Moscow. It starts like every World War II game from those days: basic training, albeit this time with potatoes instead of grenades. Thereafter the Stalingrad campaign unfolds with missions

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2005

DEVELOPER
Infinity Ward

PUBLISHER
Activision

LINK
callofduty.com

ABOVE: The reloading animations are a nice way to show off the devs' handiwork.

RIGHT: The game gave the impression of a squad shooter, even when you know it isn't.

kicking off with moments of cinema. On your way to reinforce embattled Russian comrades, you navigate darkened corridors while echoing megaphones demand your surrender. You hunker down in a trench as tanks rumble overhead. As you attempt to crawl surreptitiously through a pipe into a train yard, gunfire bores rays of light through the metal.

The singleplayer is divided into three campaigns, the other two following British Desert Rats in North Africa and France and American Rangers in Western Europe. Some levels are conventionally tight and scripted, others expansive and less controlled. But above all *Call of Duty 2* sold drama. By the time you're enacting a close-quarters raid on a fuel depot as Sergeant John Davies in Egypt, you've already hunted panzers in Stalingrad as Private Vasili Koslov and feverishly repulsed waves of Wehrmacht from its City Hall by sniping across a square.

IN A TENSE ESCAPE MISSION YOU TAKE THE GUNNER'S SEAT IN AN ARMOURED CAR

As the Brits in Africa, you defend a town by spotting far-away targets for artillery with binoculars and plod beside a tank and clear out bunkers. In a tense escape mission you take the gunner's seat in a commandeered armoured car as Captain Price and Private McGregor bicker while wheeling past half-tracks and anti-tank troops.

UNEXPECTED TURN

In an unexpected turn, you're given the command of a tank in an engaging vehicular puzzle which works surprisingly well to mix up the pace. It begins with a Star Wars-like reporting-in ("Zebra One ready!"), then dives into a tank rush with a real sense of momentum. You hunt your quarry across sand dunes beneath a golden horizon, where tanks erupt in delightful plumes.

But the most memorable set piece in *Call of Duty 2* is the D-Day mission. There's not a moment of silence in this intense retread of an

CALL TIME

Infinity Ward's CoDs in the 2000s

CALL OF DUTY 2003
The minds behind *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* released their debut to great acclaim, racking up 80 Game of the Year awards.

CALL OF DUTY 2 2005
Infinity Ward's sequels continued to push the envelope for immersive World War II games, before they left the period for good.

CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE 2007
Set in the present day, the series' destiny changed instantly with *Modern Warfare*'s massive success.

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2 2009
The worthy sequel to *Modern Warfare* was the last before two studio leads left to form Respawn Entertainment.

The guns have always felt good in *Call of Duty*, and this one's no exception.

FAR LEFT: With *Call of Duty 2* Infinity Ward gave the best version of Saving Private Ryan: the game.

ABOVE: Disappointingly, it does not flush.

event explored by a proto-Infinity Ward in *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*. Soldiers perish under gunfire and topple from rope ladders beneath the sheer cliffs of Pointe du Hoc.

At the top, trenches lead to an orchard with artillery to be sabotaged. The sound is carnage. Thompsons and BARs rattle against the hum of an MG. The staccato pops of rifles and 'zing' of ejected Garand clips intermingle with American and German yelling. Bombs whistle and crash, walls light up with gunfire and wisps of smoke attend bullet holes. The war-torn landscape may look distinctly polygonal nowadays, but it never feels less than exciting.

Once the artillery's dealt with, the level is played in reverse as you refight across the orchard to clear the bunkers. Ultimately, the mood switches to one of desperation, with you clinging onto the Pointe until air support can save the day. The sense of release when they do is heightened immeasurably by playing on Veteran difficulty – a thoroughly punishing grind. This is *Call of Duty 2* at its peak.

HEAD-POPPING

There were World War II games before this, but had they ever felt so electrifying? Its weapons sounded punchy and realistic. They came with smooth reloading animations which showed off accurate models and reinforced the sense that you were embodying someone super-competent, a fantasy (let's be honest) elaborated with each sequel with greater fidelity.

Lots of the game is seen through iron-sights and it can feel like an exercise in head-popping, but no less than its sequels. Targets are squishy, and unloading a Thompson makes you feel like a gangster. Unlike its sequels you can't throw back grenades and you can't sprint. But it did introduce smoke grenades, which spread effectively and confuse enemies so you can move unseen to the next slab of waist-high cover.

Unlike the original, *Call of Duty 2*'s levels fan out into more open spaces. This required rebuilding the AI, so enemy troops could respond to player attempts on the objective from various angles.

BAND OF BROTHERS

Two valiant comrades clamber on a Panzer and lob a grenade through its

WAR VETERAN

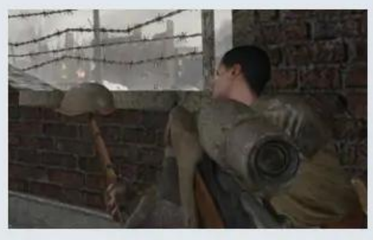
The most challenging missions on Veteran

THE SILO

Even after you've torturously cleared each of the marked houses in this bucolic village, you're charged with sniping mortar teams from above a silo before they get you first.

BATTLE FOR HILL 400

A gruelling uphill fight transitions into a defence of a bunker on top of a hill, where you have to take cover from artillery, snipe baddies and hold out for help.



COMRADE SNIPER

Staying behind cover to pick off waves of enemies is tricky when your comrades have a laissez-faire approach to covering your back. Make those bullets count.

The memorable demo mission kicks off with a bumpy ride into town.

top hatch. They leap off, but kind of can't, and then soar off into the snow as they explode with the tank. Nobody's going to claim these guys are sentient, but in other moments *Call of Duty 2*'s soldiers helped make you feel like part of a squad.

Despite their routine death by silliness, these voiced squad mates are memorable. That squad feeling is mainly accomplished with a "battle chatter" system which bestows a rough situational awareness to its AI.

It isn't a squad tactics game, but you want to believe it is when you hear allies attempting to cut through the confusion of battle and coordinate your attention. They'll point out targets with precise coordinates including, "Fascists! Behind the low wall, over to the south!" and, "Krauts! By the sandbags!" as well as the 20,000 other lines of dialogue of that flavour which were recorded.

Ramping the difficulty up to Veteran sharply exposes the foibles of the AI. Enemies' gunfire is dead-on and their massed grenades are extremely annoying. They're idiots to code: in practice it is difficult to get the drop on them. Like multiple Agents Smith they'll swivel as one and fire with unerring accuracy.

YOU NEVER FEEL LIKE YOU'RE FIGHTING ALONE LIKE YOU DO IN, SAY, HALO

It is cheering when comrades rush forwards autonomously, dropping foes and yelling military garble. But when they stop advancing, because you have not tripped an invisible logic switch which will force them onwards, missions can grind to a halt. As a result a lot of Veteran is spent trying to usher allies onwards where they'll face enemies so you don't have to. All the same, you never feel like you're fighting alone like you do in, say, *Halo*. The texture standards of the time even let me imagine that Sgt Randall's cuboid head disguised the face of Tom Hanks' Captain Miller.

CURTAIN CALL

The blurb on the back of the box promises "more cinematic intensity and chaos than ever before". On this note, 2024's *Call of Duty: Black Ops 6* has the edge, its singleplayer unfurling a breathless, genre-blending rollercoaster. But beside it, *Call of Duty 2* isn't embarrassed.

It may be slower, and not just because you can't sprint. It's a little more composed and sober, yet still exhibits the set-pieces that came to be the series' trademark. It shores up some gravitas from its use of Military Channel footage, photo slides to foreground missions, and the inclusion of journal entries from its otherwise inscrutable protagonists. This gives it the feeling of a history piece. Meanwhile the self-serious score by Graeme Revelle and the stately quotes from generals which appear when you die give it a solemn atmosphere.

On the other hand there's something about its clarity of visuals which make it enjoyable to return to. The magnificent TV series Band of Brothers convinced Epic to desaturate the look of 2006's *Gears of War* and a host of games followed suit, including 2008's *Call of Duty: World at War*. But *Call of Duty 2* still aims to please with its blue skies and golden sandstone towns and lush Normandy bocage.

Altogether, *Call of Duty 2* survived as more than just an artefact. Battling with the game even on the highest difficulty until the relief of "Checkpoint Reached" remains a thrill ride. ■

A huge, flashy, cinematic moment, but it's not just bombast

Adolescent Gnoblars trying to sneak into an adult film, minus the trenchcoat.

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III

Making the Old World feel young again. *By Matt Elliott*

Around a year ago, Creative Assembly released a grand cinematic trailer to commemorate the full release of Immortal Empires: a game mode that fuses together every campaign map from the *Total War: Warhammer* franchise. The trailer serves almost no functional purpose: instead, it's crammed with the sort of narrative moments that make Warhammer obsessives go glassy eyed, the significance of which would likely take me another article to explain: there's Grombrindal and Tyrion fighting back to back; Gotrek and Felix standing off against Skarbrand; and haughty elf lord Teclis accidentally dropping a racial slur in front of the Dwarf High King. Marvel fans have Captain America brandishing Thor's hammer in Avengers: Endgame; we have Richard Ridings, voice of Daddy Pig and Thorgrim Grudgebearer, losing his shit because an elf accidentally said 'short'. It's a tragedy that we'll never have a YouTube reaction video it deserves.

It's a huge, flashy, cinematic moment, but it's not just bombast. Immortal Empires is the largest *Total War* campaign ever, both in terms of physical map size and number of factions. When you fire up a new campaign for the first time, there are over 272 factions, the weakest of which, admittedly, will be eradicated by turn ten, devoured by more powerful armies like shrimp dip at an ogre wedding. If you have the DLC and previous iterations, an excessive 96 of these factions are playable at the start; a number I refuse to check because I don't want it not to be true.

Whatever you think about Creative Assembly's DLC pricing model, let's recognise this for what it is: the most absurdly detailed representation of Warhammer's Old World in any media, epic in sweep, dizzying in scope, and a method of play that didn't exist when the game was first released in 2022.

THRONG SONG

That volume of choice would be paralysing for any normal person, but for me, it's unusually easy. I want to understand how the game has changed since release, so this is the excuse I didn't need to play as

NEED TO KNOW

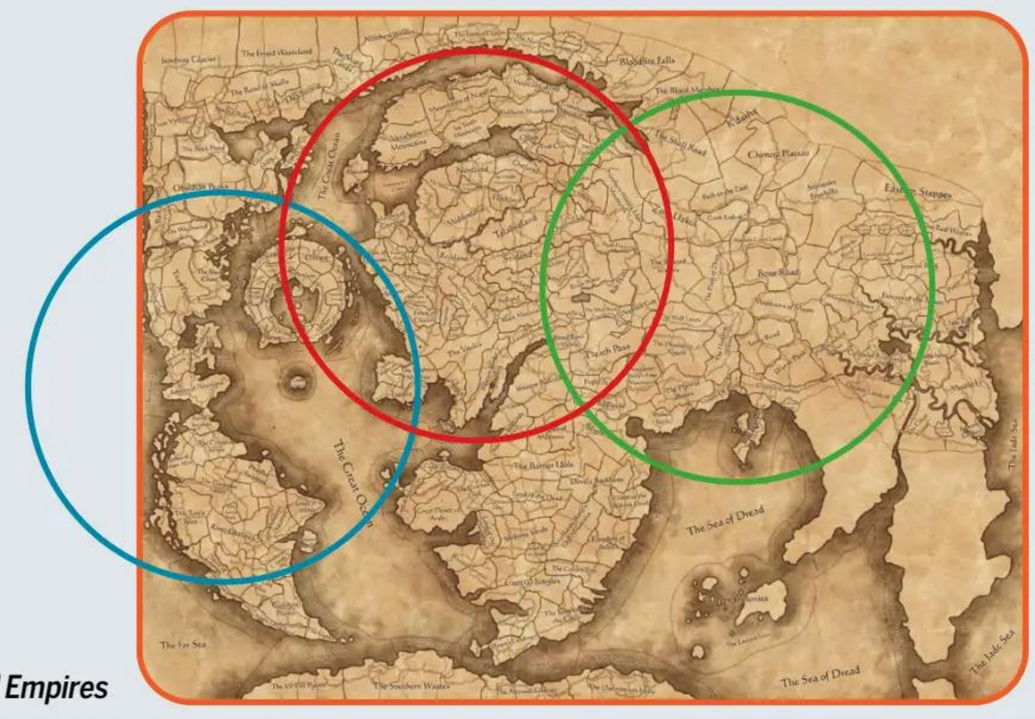
RELEASE February 2022	**DEVELOPER** Creative Assembly
PUBLISHER Sega	**LINK** warhammer3.totalwar.com

Cutting through them like a bull in a Cathay shop.

dwarfs. Not only are they the race I've played most, giving me a solid basis for comparison, but I'd rather be righting wrongs as the Dawi than basically anything else, including writing this feature. At any point in this article I might step away so I can go and shoot trolls with an Organ Gun, and the beauty of print is that you'll never know. The question is: which dwarfs? Each of the Legendary Lords has a different starting position, which makes all the difference when considering the vibe of your campaign. Let's use Grombrindal as an example. In the lore, he's the White Dwarf: a mythical figure who appears when the Dawi are in mortal peril. He's part Doctor Who, part Santa Claus, except he uses a rune axe instead of a sonic screwdriver and every greenskin is on his naughty list. In *Warhammer III*, Grombrindal now has his own faction, The Ancestral Throng, who start on the far west of the map in the mountains of Naggaroth. Not only are you beset on all sides by aggressive Dark Elves and Chaos demons, it's about as far away from the fabled Bugmans Brewery as any Dwarf starting point on the map. It's also an example of how different it feels like to, say, playing as Belagar Ironhammer and repeating the mad rush to reclaim Karak Eight Peaks. This is the true appeal of Immortal Empires, and the thing I love most about coming back: the sheer scale and complexity breathes fresh life into an older game. Even without new mechanics, I'm happy just seeing how each campaign plays out compared to its developmental forebears. Perhaps I'm easily pleased, but it would literally be enough to just replay it as my favourite faction on a map the size of a literal planet.

MALLUS AFORETHOUGHT

How Immortal Empires stacks up against previous campaigns



- *Total War: Warhammer*
- *Total War: Warhammer II*
- *Total War: Warhammer III*
- *Total War: Warhammer III: Immortal Empires*

DEEPS IMPACT

I'm going to stay with dwarfs for a few more paragraphs, because they elegantly represent how the game has changed and also because there's nothing you can do to stop me. This isn't merely a case of playing the same factions in different locations: many of the races have been overhauled, completely altering how they function. The dwarfs now have the Age of Reckoning mechanic, designed to represent how the

TOP: Is Tamurkhan being shot to pieces or are those go-faster stripes?

TOP RIGHT: Chaos Dwarf bombardments make normal artillery look like armpit farts.

grudgement works in the lore. There is, famously, no Khazalid word for 'forgiveness', and righting wrongs is central to their culture. Dwarf factions now have a ten-turn timer, during which they can fill up a special grudge-o-meter (it's not called that) by fighting specific armies or taking settlements. The problem with this, in previous iterations, was that it encourages the classically insular dwarfs to play wide, not tall. It feels wrong to play as expansionist Dawi, who regard anyone who strays too far from the Holds with the same deep suspicion as an elderly relative trying kombucha for the first time. Creative Assembly addressed this with an update that added a Deeps mechanic, which allows you to spend significant resources expanding key settlements in a very Dwarf-y way, digging deeply and greedily to make regions more functional and profitable. From a lore perspective, you're opening previously lost regions of the Dwarf Underway. In terms of gameplay, this makes your biggest settlements more profitable, and you can lock down settlements by sealing the Holds: a defensive choice that buffs your garrisons and siege defences, but damages your diplomatic relations.

A MONSTROUSLY CRUEL RACE OF DAEMONSMITHS AND INDUSTRIALISTS

HASHUT IT OUT

As well as overhauling old factions, a significant new one has been added since release... and it's more dwarfs. Stay with me; I promise these are the least dwarfy dwarfs in the Warhammer world. They use magic, grow exotic beards and prize innovation. Forge of the Chaos dwarfs adds the Dawi-Zharr, a monstrously cruel race of Daemonsmiths and industrialists. They're a great example of how the simple addition of a new race can change how *Warhammer III* plays. It turns the game into a management sim of sorts, albeit one with rocket batteries and hobgoblins. Expansion and maintenance become dependent on how you manage your resources and output, which sounds rather benign until you realise one of the key components is forced labour. This means managing your building types, operating at maximum efficiency, and using trade convoys to sell your ill-gotten and unholy wares.

It's a fascinating twist on the standard *Total War* format, and, in all honesty, it feels like a game in itself. You also need to consider your standing in the Tower of Zharr, the religious centrepoint of the Chaos Dwarf world, which is basically what the Vatican would be if God was swapped out with a malevolent flaming bull-daemon.

The most recent DLC update also does a fine job of changing how existing races play. The new Ogre Legendary Lord, Golgfag Maneater, for example, is a muscular example of a gimmick campaign that feels significantly different without losing what makes the series appealing. You accept contracts from various factions, helping them achieve their diplomatic goals by raiding, razing, and outright violence. The joy of this is that you don't suffer the same diplomatic penalties as you'd get attacking every enemy on the map. Once your contract is over, you take your reward, make your peace and often watch your employer rise to power. You're a kingmaker who gets paid in meat. The best thing about this is that it offers a stepped-back look at the vast Immortal Empires map – a game mode so massive that I'll literally never see all of it. ■

VILLAINESSES

I support women's rights, but I also support women's wrongs. ***By Jess Kinghorn***

LEFT: *Catherine Classic* asks, "If you hate me that much, then why are you so obsessed with me?"

For many women, a not insignificant amount of energy is dedicated to doing what's right: exfoliating the right way, handling drama in the group chat the right way, making key career moves the right way, and on and on and on. So when a villainess comes along and says, in the immortal words of Eartha Kitt, "I want to be evil," is it any wonder my ears prick up?

Shape-shifting assassin Orin the Red comes into the final act of *Baldur's Gate III* swinging, with a number of NPCs potentially revealing themselves to actually be her in disguise. It's a memorable introduction, with Orin leveraging social expectations to create unease rather than appease, before tearing away the mask to reveal the barely restrained pulsating id beneath. Wearing it all on her cartilaginous sleeve is just one reason why I love her – alongside her deeply relatable struggle for fatherly approval.

Shortly after, Orin can also rock up to where you sleep, call you a little piggy and threaten to paint the town with you don't wanna know what if you refuse a very temporary alliance. Naturally I said, "Take me, I'm yours!" She's far from the only villainess that wants to play with your heart though.

Catherine Classic itself is as divisive as its eponymous... this puzzler picks at the player with questions that interrogate their feelings about romantic relationships, prompting you to answer in one of two flavours of a false dichotomy. Do you think life starts with marriage? Who do you think is the real villain here? Katherine, Catherine, or Vincent himself? Arguably reductive in its attitudes towards both men and women, painting in these stark tones demands a strong reaction – which, like chiaroscuro, is often illuminating.

DISHONORABLE MENTIONS

A few more women behaving badly

LADY DIMITRESCU

It helps that *Resi Village*'s Lady Dimitrescu is also brought to unlife by actor Maggie Robertson.

GLADOS

Her withering judgement throughout *Portal*'s battery of tests is iconic all on its own.

FLEMETH

We all admire *Dragon Age*'s Flemeth. Voiced by Kate Mulgrew, she can turn into a dragon.

THE BOSS

The shadow of The Boss looms large over the entire *Metal Gear Solid* series.

BAD MOON RISING

The best villains don't just entertain, or offer catharsis by doing what we never would; they reveal something of the monster within our own heart.

Enter Yotsuyu goe Brutus, a secondary antagonist in *Final Fantasy XIV*'s *Stormblood* expansion, but the headline act in my opinion. Yotsuyu is saddled with a backstory so tragic, one wishes the writers had perhaps shown a little restraint. Orphaned at a young age, Yotsuyu's aunt and uncle expect her to engage in all the drudgery of domestic labour and social reproduction while never enjoying the comfort or protection of her community. This collective failure sparks Yotsuyu's searing hatred for Doma and its people, alongside a bottomless appetite for revenge. The fine edge of her fury eventually catches the eye of the invading Garlean empire's crown prince Zenos yae Galvus. The chronically bored tyrant recognises Yotsuyu's hatred as a useful tool, and appoints her as acting imperial viceroy of Doma to terrorise her countrymen.

THE BEST VILLAINS REVEAL SOMETHING OF THE MONSTER WITHIN OUR OWN HEART

Once the land is returned to its people, the patch quests offer a glimmer of what might've been possible had a young Yotsuyu been shown even a little bit of kindness. Unfortunately, this is explored by reducing the capacity of a powerful woman to that of an amnesiac child. Deeply questionable writing aside, part of the tension of this stretch of quests is that now Doma has command over its own future, will it repeat the sins that created a monster like Yotsuyu in the first place?

Mercifully, the infantilisation of this villainess is not permanent, though tragedy strikes again when she is leveraged as a blunt instrument by her own family once more.

Naturally, your Warrior of Light eclipses her, but they're powerless to stop her ambitious brother, Asahi. A Garlean ambassador, he orchestrated much of his sister's last act in a pathetic bid for Zenos' favour. Yotsuyu regards Asahi as emblematic of the very worst of Doma, refusing to see her suffering even when it took place right in front of him; instead of being the ally she desperately needed, he only ever looked right through her toward his own ambitions.

However, using the last of her power, Yotsuyu does what the Warrior of Light cannot and slakes her thirst for revenge with her own brother's blood. Always seen by others as a means to an end and never an end in herself, it's a stunning final image and one that not even Asahi can look away from. ■

RIGHT: Orin the Red cuts an imposing figure by wearing it all on her sleeve.

THE TIMED BLOCK

Choose the right moment, and you can topple gods. ***By Harvey Randall***

RIGHT: *Sekiro*'s blueprint was so good, even Star Wars started working with it.

I finished *Nine Sols* just before 2024 ended – and I'm glad I did, because it's one of my favourite games of the year. Partially because of its gorgeous art direction, solid story, and exceptional fight design. But also because it happens to be following a trend that is downright pleasing to me: the Soulslike genre is looking a whole lot more Sekirolike, lately.

In case you missed FromSoftware's masterwork, here's a basic explanation. In *Sekiro*, your objective isn't just to reduce your enemy's health bar to zero – it's to break their posture. To do so, you need to apply damage to it. Taking chips off their health will accomplish this, but the real name of the game is timing your blocks just-so. The window to pull one off is far more forgiving than the all-or-nothing parries of past *Souls* games, and the reward for doing so is proportionately smaller.

Sekiro is sometimes described as a rhythm game in a trenchcoat, and that's pretty accurate. When you settle into the much yearned-for flow state, you can find yourself tapping that block button like one might bang a drum. But I actually don't really like rhythm games – and yet, I adore a good Sekirolike. Why is that? Well, I've got a couple of ideas.

THE ART OF THE DUEL

Some of FromSoftware's best boss fights have been its duels. These are bosses that help you feel as if you are on even footing with your opponent – entering an arena not with an insurmountable wall of flesh, but with a rival. The key to these is partly just aesthetic, but it's also the feeling of trading blows.

There's an intangible neurological glee I get when I walk into a boss room, get flattened by an inscrutable chain of sword-swings and then – little by little – start to download them. It's like The Matrix, if the Matrix suffered a terribly slow AOL-era landline connection. It's gotten to the point where I don't even care about beating the boss, I just want that sense of mastery.

Nine Sols expanded on this with the Unbounded Counter: you need to pre-emptively hold down the block button to charge it, and then release at the right moment. The catch being, you can only charge it for so long before you whiff your defence entirely. Succeed, though, and you'll send your foe reeling, no matter how big their blow is. Which leads me to the other half of the coin of my love for this mechanic – because some games let you parry anything.

YOU NEED TO PRE-EMPTIVELY HOLD DOWN THE BLOCK BUTTON TO CHARGE IT

In my mind, the timed block and the parry are the closest a game can get to that feeling of toppling a giant. In contrast to the idea of a duel, this benefit of the timed block is a seemingly infinite suspension of disbelief that we have for parrying when we're behind the wheel.

If I was asked to believe that a small robot deflected a giant's building-sized fist by raising their own at the right time in a TV show, I'd roll my eyes. In *Ultrakill*, though, the feat of batting away The Corpse of King Minos' giga-swings with nothing but your spindly synthetic arm is rad as hell. OK, I might cheer for that on the silver screen too, but the point is I'd require worldbuilding and setup for it. V1 doesn't need Chekhov's gun, he just does it.

Personally, I think the timed block is the future of Soulslike games. It just unlocks so many possibilities, combining so satisfyingly with so many elements of your average Soulslike, that I'm surprised *Elden Ring* didn't have it. Let me tap my way through Malenia's Waterfowl Dance, Hidetaka Miyazaki. I promise it'll be cool as hell. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
22 March, 2019

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

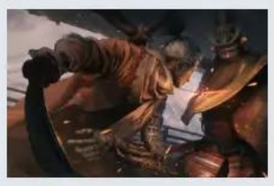
PUBLISHER
Activision

LINK
shorturl.at/EJsrl

COUSINS OF THE TIMED BLOCK

Know your hist-parry

THE PARRY
You get a very small window to pull this off, but when you do, time stands still. Your foe crumples to their knees with an appropriate 'you're screwed' noise. Poor Gwyn never stood a chance.



THE MIKIRI/ JUMP
Sekiro's Mikiri and Jump attacks are, in essence, a timed block – they just require you to hit a different button. I will never tire of stomping on some fool's sword.

THE BACKSTEP
The midpoint between a parry and a dodge roll, a backstep demands discipline over your movement. The reward? Feeling like Neo from The Matrix as played by Keanu Reeves, but better.

THE UNBOUND COUNTER
My favourite new addition, *Nine Sols*' Unbound Counter makes you feel like a spring-coiled genius, especially since it works on regular attacks, too. The skill ceiling is in orbit.

FAR RIGHT: Yeah. I can probably parry that.

RIVALS

A little one on one time. ***By Scott McCrae***

ABOVE: The Marauder brought the rival battle to *Doom Eternal*.

A lot of the time in games, it's easy to get caught up in the massive set-pieces and boss fights. Yes, it's undeniably super cool when Raiden batters a giant Metal Gear Ray at the start of *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, but when it comes down to it, there's nothing that gets me going in a game like a good one-on-one brawl with someone on a level playing field. Raiden's fights with Jetstream Sam aren't the focus of *Metal Gear Rising*'s plot – in fact, Sam doesn't have much screen time at all – but no one else has had such an impact... well, except for Senator Armstrong.

Stylish Action Games are the biggest home to this trope: *Bayonetta*, Platinum's *The Wonderful 101*, *Ninja Gaiden II*... I could go on. But there's a reason that rivals are so prominent in the action game genre, and that's due to the series that revolutionised the genre: *Devil May Cry*.

Dante and Vergil having a scrap is one of the constants in life. Both sons of the legendary dark knight Sparda have been battling since the series started in 2001 (albeit, as the possessed Nelo Angelo) all the way through the edgy reboot *DmC: Devil May Cry*, and most recently 2019's *Devil May Cry 5*. But the game that cemented this rivalry as the all-time great that it is was *Devil May Cry 3*. Telling the story of a younger Dante, *DMC3* opens with an invitation from Vergil to meet. And after fighting hordes, you meet atop a tower in the pouring rain, and the two lock eyes for the first time.

You're thrust into an incredible bossfight between two twin brothers. It's an intense swordfight that pushes you to your limit. Once you finally get that health bar down, the cutscene plays and Vergil stabs Dante through the chest (with his own sword no less!). It's embarrassing; you get smacked down, and Vergil walks off, confirming that you are nothing.

Which leads me onto my other favourite thing about a rival, it's an amazing way to tell a story. The first time you fight Vergil, Dante is left in a pool of his own blood. Then halfway through the game you meet again, and this time the brothers come to a standstill. And right at the end of the game, Dante and Vergil step up to each other one last time, and Dante emerges victorious. This allows the player to chart Dante's growth during the formative years of his life, turning him from the cocky fighter we meet at the start, to the legendary demon hunter we saw in the original *Devil May Cry* game.

THE FIRST TIME YOU FIGHT VERGIL, DANTE IS LEFT IN A POOL OF HIS OWN BLOOD

What makes it even more impactful is just how much Capcom treats this rivalry with respect. Towards the end of the game, a true big bad emerges that requires the combined efforts of Dante, Vergil and Lady to take out. But despite this set-piece moment that would signal the end of most titles, the actual finale is a squabble introduced with dialogue that sounds like two ten-year-olds fighting over the Xbox.

TAKE YOUR TURN

Outside of action games, the genre most known for the rival has to be RPG titles. This is mostly thanks to that game about collecting tons of monsters and battling your rival, who you definitely named 'arseface', but those games aren't on PC, so I'd like to point out another. Sega's *Like a Dragon* series started out as an action game. Over the course of those seven games, they had some crackers like Goda, Majima and *Yakuza 0*'s Kuze – although that was more 'how many times do we have to teach you this lesson old man' than two equals fighting it out. But *Yakuza* never abandoned its storytelling traits when it turned into a turn-based RPG, and 2024's *Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth* featured one of the best rivalries we've seen in recent years. Yamai is introduced very soon after Kasuga arrives in Hawaii, and over the course of the game, goes from a bit of a typecast scary villain to one of the most important characters to Kasuga's journey and growth.

In fact, Sega is quite good at this. When you think about Sonic villains, no doubt Shadow the Hedgehog pops into your mind. The rivalry between Sonic and Shadow is undoubtedly what made *Sonic Adventure 2* such a memorable title and has had such an effect on the series that the entire third movie was built around it.

It may not be the flashiest, but there's nothing better than two equal fighters duking it out. ■

RIVAL SCHOOLS

More all-time great rivalries

LET ME SOLO HER
The legendary *Elden Ring* player helped many conquer the Goddess of Rot.

SNAKE(S) VS OCELOT
Revolver Ocelot took on both generations of Snake in *Metal Gear Solid*.

RYU VS KEN
The classic fighting game duo has been at it since 1987.

YOU VS VALVE
That Steam backlog keeps growing huh?

RIGHT: *Tekken's* Kazuya and Heihachi are stuck in a loop of throwing each other off cliffs.

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FEATURE

CIVILIZATION

EXPLORE HOW THE HISTORIC SERIES HAS EVOLVED

THE TOP 100

THE BEST PC GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW

FEATURE

CYBERPUNK 2077

IS A LACK OF CHOICE A BAD THING?

REINSTALL

CALL OF DUTY 2

BEFORE MODERN WARFARE TOOK OVER

MODS

STREETS OF RAGE X

ADD SOME PUNCH TO A 16-BIT CLASSIC

BOOKAZINE